# Psychopathology in the 2016 Election. Michael Lerner. *Tikkun.* 11/3/16.

IT’S NO SECRET that the past several decades have witnessed growing economic inequality and deepening economic insecurity for a very large section of working people both in the U.S. and other capitalist countries around the world. Yet what most analysts miss are the hidden injuries of class that become dramatically intensified when the underlying psychological and spiritual dysfunction of global capitalism interacts with economic insecurity. Right-wing, ultra-nationalist, fundamentalist, and/or racist movements gain support as more people begin to lose faith in the efficacy of democratic governments and turn to authoritarian leaders in the hope that their own fears and pain can be alleviated. This has been happening around the world, not just in the U.S. As a nonprofit we are prohibited from endorsing any political candidate or party, so the reflections here are not meant to influence your voting in 2016, but to shape an agenda for how to build a healthier and more just society in the coming decades.

In his presidential campaign, Senator Bernie Sanders addressed some of these economic inequalities by advocating for New Deal-type reforms, but he shied away from any systematic critique of the capitalist order itself. Unfortunately for his supporters, in his televised debates at least, Sanders failed to address the psycho-spiritual pain in people’s lives caused by the hidden psychic injuries of class and globalized capitalist ideologies.

This pain operates on two levels. On a psychological level people are suffering because they have absorbed the capitalist message: “You live in a meritocracy, so you get what you deserve, and if you haven’t achieved the level of success you want, it’s your fault. Moreover, everyone is out for him or herself so you have to maximize your own self-interest, regardless of the impact on others.”

On the spiritual level, tens of millions of people are suffering because they desperately want meaningful and purposeful lives and instead are trapped in jobs that do not produce anything of lasting value, and feel that they are wasting their lives yet believe that there is no alternative and no way out. What’s worse is that many find their work is not really respected (in fact they have a hard time respecting it themselves because they can’t see how it connects to anything with a higher purpose than a paycheck for themselves and massive profits for the super rich).

The liberal and progressive forces have a limited understanding of why the very impressive list of economic changes and important populist benefits Sanders offered the American people did not win him a majority of the votes cast by Democrats in the 2016 presidential primaries. Given his powerful fundraising from millions of Americans, they can’t blame it on the candidate not having enough money to finance a competitive campaign. Sanders rarely addressed the hidden injuries of class and capitalist ideology and how they are absorbed, even by working people whose economic lot is very insecure and who objectively might have been expected therefore to be more responsive to Sanders’s platforms. Sanders stayed on a primarily economistic discourse, talking about the pain caused by economic insecurity but not about the deeper distortions in our own self-perceptions and the way we relate to each other—distortions and behaviors that are endemic to the way we’ve been socialized since we were children with the values and judgements of the competitive marketplace.

To address that deeper level, Sanders would have had to go beyond New Deal entitlements and challenge the essentials of the capitalist worldview and the institutions that daily reinforce them. Most Democrats, social change activists, and environmentalists don’t want to look at the need to transform the larger economic system. Some don’t want to look because they are benefitting from that system even as they mourn some of its consequences for those they describe as less fortunate. Others avoid looking because they believe any larger systemic change is unrealistic and a waste of their time and money. So instead they focus on more narrow and local struggles, or national single-issue campaigns that seek to make narrowly constructed changes without challenging the deeper, systemic problems.

Some activists maintain that we can save the life-support system of the planet without replacing the capitalist system and its intrinsic need to expand consumption. Some imagine that global peace can be obtained without ending nationalist and religious extremist bravado such as the claim that the U.S. is a special nation that has a right or responsibility to lead the world and be ‘number one’—economically, culturally, and politically. Some believe that a just world can be obtained without a radical redistribution of wealth—hence the efforts for a higher minimum wage instead of a living wage and confiscatory taxes on those whose wealth exceeds $10 million. Illusion after illusion after illusion—most held in the name of ‘being realistic’ where what is realistic is defined by the one percent and their allies in the media, at universities, and their large array of hired mouthpieces who speak about the impossibility of creating fundamental equality. Given this fear that they would be too far ahead of people by talking about a vision of a very different kind of world, liberals and progressives often end up sounding like a bunch of complainers—they know what they are against, but rarely do they publicly articulate what they are for, and so it’s hard to know if those in one movement, say environmentalists, really want the same world as the people rallying for Sanders’s economic agenda or the people opposing the use of torture, drones, and other forms of violence.

When reactionary movements gain public support, liberals and progressives simply dismiss them as products of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, or stupidity rather than trying to understand what is missing in the Left’s message. It is so much easier to demean those with whom we disagree than try to understand their legitimate grievances even if the ways they articulate those grievances are irrational and scary. Yet until we do that, these forces will grow, even if Donald Trump loses by a landslide in the November 2016 election. This is because if he loses, his loss can be attributed in part to the peculiarities of his personality and style of presentation, which have alienated fellow Republicans. These are often the same Republicans who themselves have been advocating policy directions and ideas that are just as militarist, racist, sexist, in favor of the one percent, homophobic, xenophobic, and Islamophobic as those championed by Trump.

So let’s look deeper.

**The Economic Dimension**

The facts of economic inequality were dramatized and popularized by the courageous energies of those who participated in the Occupy Movement. Due to their efforts, it is now well known that the upper one percent of income earners controls a vastly disproportionate amount of the wealth of this society. As *The Guardian* newspaper reported in May 2016, white working-class Americans “have seen their wages stagnate or even decline in real terms” and that “median net worth fell for every group in the U.S. between 1998 and 2013 except for one: the wealthiest 10 percent. Working-class Americans saw their net worth decline in that period by a staggering 53 percent. Meanwhile, the richest tenth got 75 percent richer.” The wealthiest 10 percent of U.S. households own 76 percent of all the wealth in America.

Income and wealth inequality translates into deep feelings of insecurity in the lives of most working people. Over 60 percent of Americans report that they don’t know what they would do if faced with an unexpected bill of $400 or more. Many have to rely on growing credit card debt, and then find themselves paying off the interest on that debt with money they need for basic necessities.

While other advanced industrial countries around the world have significant differences in wealth, many of their populations don’t find themselves in as much distress. In the decades after World War II, powerful labor and social democratic movements struggled against their own capitalist elites and created basic protections including universal health care, free (or mostly free) educational institutions, guaranteed incomes or generous benefits for the unemployed, health and safety regulations at the workplace, four-to-six week paid vacations each year, free (or generous) child care for parents, and retirement benefits for the elderly. Not only did these provide economic security for their citizens, they also created a culture and society in which people are gradually absorbing the value of caring for one another. They understand that to have a thriving, healthy society, everyone’s well-being and needs matter. The U.S., in contrast, has one of the least generous packages of social welfare for the non-wealthy. In the past few decades the wealthy have successfully dismantled or significantly reduced their tax burden and, in turn, the amount of money available for basic social services and repair of crumbling public facilities, and they are not honoring pension agreements for teachers, firefighters, and other public service employees. And as unions lose their bargaining power in the face of corporations willing to take advantage of global trade agreements negotiated by the Clinton and Obama administrations (agreements that make it economically attractive to move their operations abroad to avoid taxes, environmental restrictions, and minimum wages), middle-income working people find their employment terminated and/or their promised retirement funds no longer available. They are then left desperately seeking employment even in what used to be the expected ‘retirement years’ in their seventies and eighties, often finding that the only jobs they can get are in low-paying fast food or grocery store jobs previously targeted to teenagers. All this intensifies their capitalism-generated belief that everyone is alone, so you have no choice but to focus on taking care of yourself because no one else will be there for you.

**Bringing Home the Values of the Marketplace**

Most people between 20 and 65 spend the majority of their waking hours in the world of work, and in transit to and from work. In the workplace, people quickly learn that their value is judged by how much they contribute to ensuring that the owners and managers of the corporations or other economic entities for which they work obtain the greatest amount of money and power (the Old Bottom Line). College economics courses teach that the productivity, efficiency, and rationality of businesses are measured by how much money or power they accumulate. Thus, it doesn’t take long for employees to recognize that (1) their employers are primarily interested in maximizing their own self-interest; (2) the goods or services they provide are first and foremost designed for the purpose of maximizing the Old Bottom Line without regard to serving the common good; and (3) that they themselves will be judged poorly if they try to put some larger communal, ethical, or environmental concern above the Old Bottom Line. And they are surrounded by others who have also internalized these lessons, have adapted to the value structure of the world of work, and are also in the work world to advance their own economic well-being.

The union, socialist, and communist movements of the first half of the twentieth century provided a counter-force to this singular focus on maximizing money and power by articulating a worldview of service to humanity and solidarity with fellow workers. But in the post-World War II period those movements were essentially repressed by society-wide efforts that (1) purged people from the workplace and labor movement who held these ideals; (2) portrayed socialist and communist ideas as fundamentally evil (made easier by the pseudo-communist dictatorial and repressive regimes of the Soviet Union, in Eastern Europe, and China); and (3) celebrated the accumulation of wealth and power as the highest goal. For many decades now, the media, which is mostly owned by the one percent, took a reverential approach to the rich and famous. They continually advance the notion that the rich deserve respect and honor for having accumulated their wealth and for being ‘job creators.’

In such a society, working people increasingly came to believe that the fundamental reality of the world and the only way to succeed was to look out for number one. In this worldview, anyone who thought that people could care about others was seen either as subversive, terribly naïve, or delusional. To be a winner in this society requires one to maximize one’s own self-interest, which is often achieved by perfecting the techniques of manipulating others. This is evidenced in ‘reality’ television shows such as The Apprentice, The Bachelor/The Bachelorette, and Survivor that represent a societal assault on generosity and a glorification of selfishness. These shows send a clear message: “this is the real world, so either develop the skills to dominate others or be prepared to be dominated yourself.”

The media and education system massively reinforce these values of materialism and selfishness. For example, popular television shows such as Game of Thrones and House of Cards focus on who has power over whom. Most of the characters in shows such as Girls and Transparent lack any moral fiber and manipulate others to meet their own needs. From these shows, viewers learn that people are more successful when they know how to use other people to achieve their own ends (whether that be power, money, sexual conquest, or fame). Even children’s cartoon shows often reflect this same struggle for power or show people humiliating or making fun of others. These shows portray it as humor or good clean fun, but, in fact, it sends a powerful message of how to survive and be successful in society.

By permeating our whole society, these messages have the consequence of making people feel unsure of whom they can trust and increasingly fearful that even those closest to them may prioritize advancing their own interests over genuine love and solidarity. People increasingly look at each other through the framework of “what can you do for me; in what way can you take care of my needs?” People learn to suspect each other’s motives and fear that they cannot rely on others. Many emotionally distance themselves from others, even those they are closest to. As people start to look at their spouse or partner in these terms, seeing them as vehicles for satisfying one’s own needs, marriages become increasingly fragile, the divorce rate escalates, and people in marriages no longer feel that they can be sure their partners will stick with them in the future

The triumph of selfishness as common sense creates a huge psycho-spiritual crisis and a society filled with deeply scared and lonely people. The resulting psychological distress can lead to addiction and depression, and in some cases suicide. And it generates a spiritual crisis in two ways. First, people want to live meaningful and purposeful lives but find themselves trapped in unfulfilling jobs that provide few opportunities to exercise their intelligence, creativity, desire to cooperate with rather than compete against others, desire to feel that they have done something of value with their time on this planet, and their desire to contribute to the larger society. Second, they unwittingly integrate the values of the capitalist marketplace into their personal lives. These values stand in stark contrast to the spiritual values that teach people to see each other as fundamentally valuable sacred beings who are created in the image of God and who deserve to be treated as valuable in and of themselves, rather than merely as means to satisfy other people’s wants and needs.

All this, rarely discussed in the public arena (and never taught in high schools or colleges), creates a huge sense of fear, despair, anger, and/or depression amongst large swaths of Americans. No wonder people get attracted to fantasies of ‘small town America’ where people supposedly cared about each other, not realizing that the capitalist ethos of ‘looking out for number one’ has been part of Western culture for hundreds of years, and its early articulations can be found in every imperialist regime from the ancient Romans and Greeks to Elizabethan England to the early American founders who shaped the direction of American society in part by mass murdering indigenous peoples and enslaving Africans. It is true that an ethos of community and solidarity has never been quite as low as in the past fifty years of American life as the individualism fostered by the competitive marketplace even seeps down into the consciousness of young children, but the romanticization of earlier periods of imagined solidarity among people has to be tempered by the way that actual scarcity plus the emerging ethos of individualism has been part of American society since at least the late eighteenth century.

The only places where people can experience a different set of values is either when participating as a fan or team member in professional sports where both momentarily unite, regardless of economic disparities, in support of a larger, overarching goal (i.e. to win), or the religious or spiritual world which, at least in theory, preaches that one cannot serve both God and money. Millions of people flock to right-wing churches, synagogues, and mosques precisely because they often find there a caring community—one that truly meets their needs for recognition, respect, genuine care, and support. Because the community fulfills these needs, people are willing to buy into the otherwise outlandish belief systems presented by the leaders of those communities, beliefs that demonize those outside their particular community. Unfortunately, while these communities often provide donations for the needy, feed some hungry people, or collect clothes and blankets for some homeless, they often support political and economic programs that seek to defund government programs that might have more effectively stopped those “market forces” that are the cause of much of this poverty, hunger, and homelessness.

**Meritocracy and Self-Blaming**

Not only do the values of selfishness and materialism that permeate the capitalist marketplace infiltrate people’s personal lives, undermining family stability and causing great distress, but the capitalist society justifies the huge wealth inequalities by convincing people that where they have ended up in the economic struggle of all against all is a function of their own merit—how smart they are, how hard they’ve worked, to what extent they have the personality traits that will ensure their success, etc. It is a huge pretense—intelligence tests show that differences in intelligence are distributed equally among economic classes, and you need only hear the stories of working and poor people to know that they often work as hard if not harder than anyone in the upper 20 percent of wealth holders in this society.

In the past several decades the fantasy of living in a world in which merit determines who has more and who has less has been massively reinforced by mandatory testing of students beginning in elementary school and continuing throughout the remainder of their schooling. Those who perform best on these tests are rewarded with better opportunities to go to elite colleges and then on to graduate or professional schools. The tests themselves, supposedly objective but actually heavily class, gender, and culture-biased, focus on a narrow range of skills in the use of English and math, totally ignoring other factors that might be rewarded in a more spiritually and psychologically aware society (e.g. empathy, compassion, environmental sensitivity and sustainable behavior, caring for others, generosity, creativity, awe in response to the beauty and preciousness of the universe, understanding of what social and economic justice requires, familiarity with the classic works of both Western and Eastern societies, or any form of ethical or spiritual wisdom).

What they do measure, along with grades, is the willingness of the most ambitious teens to twist themselves and their lives and jump through the hoops being presented to them by learning the skills necessary to do well on the tests, because those are likely to be a good predictor of who will be good and loyal aides to the one percent and who can’t be trusted to close their eyes to the ethical distortion of accepting the unfair aspects of this society and its environmental destructiveness and militaristic approach to the problems of the world. Yet these tests are mistakenly thought to measure your worthiness to succeed, hence deepening self-blame. I know this from personal experience—when I got to Columbia and hence ‘made it’ into the Ivy League, I found there (and in the other Ivy schools I visited when I was on Columbia’s debate team) a large group of those so hungry to ‘make it’ that they were willing to do almost anything to find the angles to advance themselves without regard to others.

Through this process of internalized self-blame, the capitalist class structure both creates pain and isolates people from others, creating a vicious cycle of deepening agony, loneliness, emotional depression, and sadness. And with capitalist consciousness now pervading much of the world, there is a kind of collective, unconscious depression that permeates and impacts all of us, even those who have managed, to a certain extent, to consciously avoid self-blaming tendencies. That pain is then compounded by the suffering of the earth itself as its life-support system collapses under the weight of capitalist accumulation and production, reflecting and contributing to global depression.

We are left with a world filled with people who know there is something deeply wrong but have no overarching framework to help them understand the depth of their internal suffering. If provided with a worldview that could help them rise above their self-blaming stories, they would see that the fault is not ‘in their stars,’ nor in themselves, but in the totality of oppressive, life-destroying dynamics that confront them daily in every corner of their lives, from overcrowded highways, to the bombardment of ads and television shows urging them to buy more goods than they can afford, to the disappointment some parents feel if their children begin to reflect the ethos of materialism and selfishness of society.

What I have learned as the Executive Director of the Institute for Labor and Mental Health for the past 38 years, and in my years as principle investigator of a National Institute of Mental Health-funded study of the psychodynamics of stress at work and in family life in American society, is that most people hate the materialism, selfishness, and competitiveness of this society and desperately yearn for a higher meaning and purpose in their lives, but believe that there is no way that the system can be changed. They hide this yearning even from themselves because tapping into the gap between their lived lives and potential lives, if their needs were met, is unbearably painful unless the context in which they allow themselves to feel these feelings is one in which they are learning from others how much each person’s individual pain is a manifestation of a more collective reality and not their own fault.

Yet this hunger for a life of meaning and transcendent purpose, and for a world in which people are caring and generous, cannot be extinguished. This is precisely because it is always present, even if most people do their best to hide it from others and from themselves. No contemporary social order based on oppression and the fostering of selfishness, materialism, and self-blame can ever be sustainable for long periods of time. A longing for meaning, purpose, connection, and mutual recognition, if directed in a positive fashion, can provide a foundation for a revolutionary consciousness. If, however, these needs are effectively manipulated by reactionary leaders and movements, they can be used to lead people in a more reactionary direction. And when right-wing programs and policies fail to deliver a more fulfilling life for people at work and for people in family life, this failure will be blamed on the demeaned others of the society who are portrayed as taking from the white majority the economic security, community solidarity, and safety that supposedly existed at some earlier historical moment.

**How the Right Reduces Self-Blame by Blaming Others and the Left Misses**

The right-wing in the U.S. became popular in the 1970s and 1980s by telling people that there was a spiritual crisis in American society that arose from the selfishness and materialism that had permeated our society. They argued that this spiritual crisis is at the root of increasing divorce rates and instability in family life. They then presented themselves as the ‘pro-family force’ with a powerful message: “You are not to blame for the instability in family life that you are experiencing—this is a social problem based on the insidious role of selfishness and materialism in our society.” And the terrible truth is that the Right, in at least one way, was correct—there was and still is a spiritual crisis and it was at the root of much of the pain people feel in their lives.

Particularly in the post-Civil Rights Movement period of the late ’60s and from then on, the Right has addressed American’s underlying psychological pain of alienation and sense that everyone is out for him or herself, and spiritual longing for meaningful lives, by blaming the most vulnerable in our society, those who were seeking to rectify long histories of oppression—African Americans and other peoples of color, then feminists, gays and lesbians, young people, and more recently undocumented workers and refugees. The Right claimed that these groups were responsible for introducing the selfishness and materialism that was corroding societal values and destroying families. The legitimate attempts by liberal and progressive movements to provide well-being and equal rights for oppressed groups were instead described as quests for unfair economic and social advantage, won at the expense of white working-class people whose economic, psychological, and spiritual suffering were the products of these allegedly narrowly focused self-interested groups who didn’t care about the welfare of others.

So please understand what is happening here. People have very legitimate pain in their lives and tend to blame themselves for it. The Right comes forward and helps them reduce the self-blaming by teaching them to externalize their anger at these ‘others.’ That anger is also directed at the government, which is portrayed as the enabler of these selfish special interest groups, and at liberals who tax people to achieve support for some minimal economic reforms. The Right encourages people to assert themselves and their needs by advocating for lower taxes and defunding government. (Not coincidentally, this goal of defunding government is championed by major sections of the one percent who want to reduce their own taxes and decrease the government’s capacity to increase the minimum wage, enforce environmental, health and safety regulations, and place other restrictions on a corporation’s ability to maximize profits.)

People who embrace the Right’s message, and externalize what would otherwise be a self-blaming anger, do in fact experience a reduction of self-blame, and a deep sense of relief that leaves them feeling cared for by the Right. And that feeling is so emotionally nurturing that many people who will actually suffer more than benefit from the Right’s programs nevertheless join the march toward downsizing the very government set up to protect their interests. But since government itself provides ‘objective caring’ in the form of material benefits, but rarely provides ‘subjective caring’ in the form of treating the recipients of government services with a deep sense of respect and appreciation, it’s all the easier for the Right to foster this resentment at government. And it doesn’t help when liberals in government like Bill Clinton and Barack Obama become advocates for trade policies which are more in the interest of the one percent than the interest of the rest of us—who can blame people for feeling betrayed by ‘big’ government?

Meanwhile, the Right, which presents itself as the champion for the needs of people wounded by the dynamics of selfishness and materialism in this society, is simultaneously championing the very dynamics of the capitalist marketplace and its ideology that are the source of much of this suffering.

And this creates the perfect opportunity for the liberals and progressives to enter the discussion and point out that much of people’s suffering is rooted in the hidden injuries of class and capitalist values—not only in the economic inequalities, but also in the psycho-spiritual crisis that the capitalist marketplace generates.

But liberals and progressives have been stuck in a narrow economistic worldview best summarized by the saying that permeated Bill Clinton’s administration: “It’s the economy, stupid.” Completely ignoring people’s inner pain and fear, they mistakenly believed that the strategies advanced by the Right (i.e., racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia) are the primary motivations leading people to embrace the Right’s demeaning of the powerless. The Left attributes these hateful attitudes and policies to a supposed inherent malice and hatred in the majority of Americans rather than see it as we do—as a failed and misguided attempt to alleviate their pain and suffering. Deeply enmeshed in their own religiophobia, people on the Left rarely open themselves to the possibility that there could be a spiritual crisis in American society. And it is this intellectual/emotional block that makes it almost impossible for many liberals and progressives to even begin to understand these dynamics, let alone address them in a compassionate way that could offer supporters of the Right an alternative way to understand and integrate their own suffering, a way which might draw people to the Left.

**A Compound Fracture: The Legacy of Humiliation from Childhood**

In research we conducted at the Institute for Labor and Mental Health (the parent body of *Tikkun* magazine) with middle-income people who were moving to the political Right, we discovered that many of those attracted to right-wing authoritarianism had been shamed as children by a punishing parent. Let me explain how this happens.

An infant child enters the world helpless and vulnerable, yet full of love and trust and generosity of spirit. She seeks parental love, acceptance, and ultimately approval. Yet many parents are unable to fully reciprocate, having themselves been emotionally damaged, in part by their having absorbed the consciousness of the capitalist marketplace. A child’s depth of human vulnerability and neediness overwhelms many parents who feel inadequate to the pure love that their children need and simultaneously are offering them. This triggers parents’ own feelings of inadequacy from having experienced as children their parents’ inability to be fully present and loving to them, an experience which many children make sense of by mistakenly feeling that they themselves are the problem, that their parents’ emotional distancing or inability to fully love and recognize them is a function of their own inadequacy in ways that they don’t really understand but which nevertheless make them feel fundamentally lacking and ‘not ok.’ This feeling was subsequently reinforced in their adult life when they blamed themselves for not having ‘made it’ in the economic marketplace or securing satisfactory love relationships as an adult.

The frustration and anger from this internalized sense of failure is compounded by the messages they receive in the workplace and through television shows that suggest everyone else (except people portrayed as ‘losers’) feels successful and satisfied. This angst is then taken out on their own children (sometimes violently, and other times in a pattern of discounting or being emotionally blind to their children’s needs in ways remarkably similar to the ways that their own parents had been emotionally blind to their needs). So the child quickly learns that to receive love and approval, she has to hide her neediness and block off her own desire to be loved or fully recognized for who she is. That requires ‘toughing it out.’

Once the child reaches adulthood, she faces a world where she is surrounded by people who have been similarly wounded. Fearful of being seen as a failure or even as mentally disturbed should she reveal her pain, she feels that she must present herself in a false way as completely ‘fine’ and ‘doing great.’ And so does mostly everyone else in her life. But then, covering her own vulnerability and pain, she feels all the more lonely and disconnected even if on a superficial level she has developed a large circle of friends (who are also hiding emotionally). At a deep level she feels unrecognized, her hunger for a deeper level of love and mutual recognition at times hidden even from herself. Sadly, the frustration engenders either escape into drugs, alcohol, television/internet addiction, emotional depression, or excessive anger at one’s own children or at others. And the cycle repeats generation after generation.

**“The hidden psycho-spiritual injuries of global capitalism shape 2016 American politics.”**

Many of us are deeply wounded from this process and carry a sense of inadequacy and deep hurt that we are not recognized or loved for who we really are. For some people, these childhood wounds made them particularly sensitive to the various ways that they perceived themselves as failing in the capitalist marketplace. Yet they chose not to share their internal struggles with their friends out of fear that doing so would lead to others seeing them as the ‘losers’ that they feel themselves to be, and they fear that such a perception by others would lead them to end their friendship. But once they participated in the consciousness-raising groups we ran at the Institute for Labor and Mental Health and allowed themselves to acknowledge self-blame and recognize the self-punishing attitudes they carried with them from childhood, their views shifted, depression eased, and genuine loving connections became more easily attained.

This kind of intervention can break the cycle described above by both bringing it to light and providing healing through connection, mutual recognition, and acknowledgment of their frustrated needs for a life of transcendent meaning and love. Through our groups, many middle-income working people eventually came to recognize that while their anger at liberal politicians for failing to stand up and fight for the changes they promised in their campaigns was entirely legitimate, it was also intensified by the repetition of personal humiliation they experienced as children and in the competitive marketplace that shapes adult lives. So it was liberating for many to become aware of the ways they had unconsciously blamed themselves for not having gotten the quality of unconditional love and recognition that they needed as children from parents who themselves did not have the skills or training to overcome the ways that these parents had lived a life of self-blame.

These unexpressed and partially unconscious feelings of abandonment and despair were triggered yet again when liberal leaders and the Clinton and Obama administrations revealed themselves to be more about serving the interests of the powerful than about love, justice, and peace. People throughout our society, including people who, for example, hadn’t voted for Obama but secretly hoped his promise of fundamental change might actually happen, experienced unbearable disappointment and a sense of humiliation that they had allowed themselves to hope again and then were forced to face the reality that the liberal heroes in whom they had invested this hope lacked the confidence to stand up and fight against a ruthless and immensely powerful one percent. No wonder, then, that the early days of hopefulness of the Obama administration yielded to disillusionment, anger, and a ruling-class funded and manipulated Tea Party response of unmitigated anger and pseudo-populist demand to defund government.

Our groups helped participants untangle their present-day disappointment in, and anger at, politicians from their historical sense of emotional abandonment and the humiliation that arose from it, which had been subsequently reinforced by their experience of ‘losers’ in the capitalist marketplace. This allowed those in our groups to recognize the manipulation of their feelings by right-wing movements and thus they did not turn to them to alleviate their pain and suffering. Unfortunately, however, many of their friends, facing similar dynamics but lacking the awareness our groups provided, were attracted to right-wing movements. These movements allowed them to reduce self-blaming by releasing their anger at marginalized others. A momentary release of self-blame, however, does not create a world with less selfishness, so their friends who joined the Right were primed with new hatreds at new groups to be blamed and demeaned (most recently Muslims and undocumented workers).

What we also discovered was that some of the racism, sexism, and homophobia that abounds in America today arises from resentment based on the mistaken belief that the needs of white working people have been ignored as ‘the special interests’ (those facing discrimination) have won the support of the elites of American society. This perception is not entirely irrational. Political elites, who are the centrists in both the Democratic and Republican parties, cannot deliver much for the majority of American working people without stepping on the toes of the economic elites whose interests they share. So what they do instead is integrate a small section of women, people of color, gays and lesbians, and other demeaned groups into positions of influence or power while the majority of those groups remain in subordinate and powerless positions in the class structure.

Meanwhile, the one percent and their coterie and the media they own and control celebrate the advances made by people in demeaned groups (women, African Americans, gays and lesbians, etc.), without changing the basic class structure of society. By allowing a small percentage of people in discriminated groups to make it into the upper earners of the society, the one percent generates the hope that we, all the rest of us, can too ‘make it’ when in fact these small advances by a few do not trickle down to the masses.

So, for example, Hillary Clinton upon winning the votes to become the Democratic nominee proudly told an adoring crowd that her nomination had broken the glass ceiling for women, when in fact most women are still getting paid less than men, are still the objects of sexist treatment and vicious rapes, and are still either put on a pedestal for praise or demeaned behind their backs. Similarly, the economic conditions of Blacks improved only slightly under the Obama presidency, neither has Justice Clarence Thomas’s role on the Supreme Court done much to break the glass ceiling for African Americans. Individuals from oppressed groups who succeed in the economic or political sphere do not necessarily change the fundamental racism, sexism, or classism of society.

Because these advances in money and power do not appear to benefit them, many middle-aged white men feel that their needs have been completely ignored. But instead of directing their rage at the capitalist system, the Right steers them to direct it against the demeaned others and against the Left, who are championing these oppressed groups. This gets intensified when the Left fails to expose these dynamics to working-class people, instead dismissing white working-class men as inherently racist, sexist, etc. This only increases the rage of those men (and sometimes working-class women as well) and makes them re-experience the humiliation, disrespect, and sense of being misunderstood. They are then attracted to politicians who promise a return to an America which never really existed for most working class people in the past. But the fantasy of it—small towns where people were known and cared for, now being stolen from them by all these ‘others,’—is a powerful lure to reactionary politics based on a real and legitimate need for human connection that is systematically undermined by the very economic order that right-wing politicians blindly support.

Given this false analysis of where their pain comes from, it is no wonder that some of these white men want to strike back at those whom they perceive as disrespecting and humiliating them. They cheer for candidates like Senator Ted Cruz or Trump because they give voice to their anger and frustration. They have a sense that some ‘other’ is to blame for their lot in life and mistakenly believe that the Right’s call to reduce taxes and downsize government will somehow ‘stick it to’ those others who have, according to the right-wing story, benefited unfairly from taxes and ‘big’ government. The middle-income white people who fall for this line are unaware that these policies are promoted by capitalist elites who want to downsize government precisely to eliminate government regulations that, in fact, protect the needs of the working class (such as the right to organize, minimum wage laws, food safety laws, safety of drugs, protections against dishonest bank lending policies, etc).

Many of these people feel that no one has ever stood up for them or genuinely recognized them as deserving of care and kindness. So when ultra-nationalist movements arise and promise to “Make America Great Again,” people believe that things will magically return to how they were before African Americans, women, and gays and lesbians made gains for equality, mistakenly directing their blame at them rather than at the ruling class for its massive onslaught of attacks on the rights of the working class. People in the U.S. and in other countries around the world participate in racist or even quasi-fascist movements which give them a sense of hope and a momentary feeling of being part of a community, thus placating and redirecting their deeper rage. Their sense of relief is intensified when these movements also promise to stop the so-called special interests from further undermining their rights and entitlements. When these same people then join anti-abortion movements and identify with the powerlessness of the unborn fetus, they also experience a temporary sense of empowerment from being able to protect and care for another in a way that they never experienced for themselves. This compounded sense of empowerment is healing for them, though the relief is very temporary like the impact of some of the addictive illegal drugs.

Another draw of dogmatic nationalist movements and their leaders is that they actually stand for what they believe in, regardless of how offensive or outrageous. Many people are sick and tired of the empty promises of centrist politicians on the Left and Right. For fifty years or more, Democratic and Republican Party politicians have promised changes and equal opportunity—but the advantages the upper 20 percent of the population have by virtue of being able to afford better schools, tutors, after school sports and music and art for their children, not to mention personal connections and financial backing when entering the world of work, belies the promise of equal opportunity and thus implicitly perpetuates self-blame. What most people need is not equal opportunity to beat out someone else in the competitive marketplace, but rather a society where everyone’s fundamental needs (both material and psychological) can be met without in the process denying others the fulfillment of their fundamental needs!

People know they are being conned by the politicians of the moderate middle, the ones who always end up being loyal lapdogs for the interests of the one percent, so when a Trump-like politician or movement comes forward and breaks all the conventions of normalcy, many people feel elated and validated in their view and experience of politics and the world. “Finally,” they tell each other, “someone is puncturing the façade, even if in outrageous ways.” Indeed, people from all corners of the political spectrum have admitted to me that they responded to that aspect of Trump’s campaign (even while many explicitly disagreed with his most racist and sexist statements, particularly after the Orlando massacre in June 2016).

**“Psychopathology: a society repressing our need for love and meaning to our lives.”**

Others responded to the hopes generated by Sanders, though they couldn’t get the satisfaction of watching Trump smash all the ‘political correctness’ idols. The joy and relief that someone was breaking through to the other side of the mind-numbing conventions of normalcy for people whose lives are experienced internally as anything but ‘normal,’ felt momentarily better than a life of being ‘realistic’ and fitting into a society whose norms might seem laudable but whose felt reality was terrible. So, many people felt elated when the emotional deadness and phoniness of centrist politicians was momentarily exposed in the presidential primaries of 2016, their promises distrusted, their well-controlled presentation of self punctured and seen as fake. As long as these outsiders are yelling that “the emperor has no clothes,” many of the victims of the hidden injuries of class may give them a pass on whatever else they say, no matter how outrageous, self-contradictory, or even fascist.

Unveiling the falsity and oppressiveness of daily life in class society should be a central focus of progressive politics. Once the Left really understands these dynamics, and is willing to address them, it can and will emerge with a more empathic and wise set of solutions.

Our task through the Network of Spiritual Progressives is to challenge the racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., but to do it in a way that helps everyone understand that working people (including people of color, women, and gays, among others) are being victimized not only economically but also psychologically and spiritually. So when some white working-class men, responding to Black Lives Matter, say “all lives matter,” we need to hear this as a cry for recognition and respect even as we insist on challenging and exposing the double oppression that Blacks, women, gays, and other marginalized peoples experience by the assaults and oppression they face as the demeaned others of our society.

**Holding both of these truths is the precondition for a successful transformative movement**

Outrage at the racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia is important and must not be muted in order to appeal to white people. But neither should we allow our outrage at these obnoxious forms of oppression distract us from acknowledging the pain that working people in this society suffer by virtue of their class position and their internalizing the hidden psycho-spiritual injuries of capitalism. Forcing us to choose between these two positions is a strategy that ruling elites in our society have exploited to their advantage. The only chance of success liberation movements will have in advanced industrial and post-industrial societies is to embrace a both/and, rather than either/or, approach. We must validate each group’s experience of oppression and help people in each class position and each identity group develop a sensitivity toward and desire for solidarity with those who experience different forms of oppression than their own.

**Empathy and Compassion for Those With Whom We Disagree**

Here is the key to helping people transform their consciousness and stay away from the hate, anger, and fear-dominated movements of ultra-nationalists, fundamentalists, racists, and/or sexists: instead of assuming that these people are fundamentally evil or intrinsically distorted, look for the kernel of genuine needs (love, connection, recognition, respect, safety, and caring) that have been systematically thwarted by society, the economy, the media, school, families, religions, and/or other people, groups, and institutions. Understand these unmet needs as underlying their harmful beliefs or hatred. Find ways to validate these needs as legitimate and deserving of respect. Once they have a sense of being ‘gotten,’ you can help them explore strategies other than their current hateful and oppressive ones to meet those needs.

I don’t mean to suggest that doing this is easy. It is going to take a whole lot of psychological sophistication on the part of people on the Left to move from demeaning those with whom we disagree to speaking to them in empathic and compassionate ways.

We will need political, spiritual, and movement leaders and activists who articulate and embody this empathy and compassion to help lead us.

We will need a domestic Empathy Tribe—people who have learned the skills of empathic communication and who are willing to go door-to-door in the old-fashioned style of community organizing, but with a very different message than community organizers conveyed in the past. It is going to require that we insist that our schools, colleges, and media reflect this empathic approach as they simultaneously challenge the materialism, selfishness, and meritocratic ideologies of capitalist society.

Empathy is the necessary precondition for a transformative movement. But a potentially successful movement needs something else: the ability to get people to envision the world they really want, to allow themselves to dream, and then to join with others to struggle for their highest vision of the good. That movement must move beyond a list of complaints to articulate a vision of the world we are for, not just what we are against. It should advocate for, what we at our Network of Spiritual Progressives call, a New Bottom Line. A New Bottom Line is one that judges the success of our social institutions, government, and corporations based not on the Old Bottom Line of whether they maximize money and power, but instead assessing them on the extent that they maximize love and caring, kindness and generosity, empathy and compassion, social and economic justice, peace and nonviolence, and environmental sustainability, as well as encourage us to transcend a narrow utilitarian approach to nature and other human beings. In short, the Caring Society: caring for each other (everyone on the planet) and for the earth. To see what such a society and its institutions might look like, please go to [**www.tikkun.org/covenant**](http://www.tikkun.org/covenant) and read through our preliminary vision.

Building this movement would be far easier if Bernie Sanders were to call for a national convention immediately after the 2016 election and put forward a platform that included the consciousness articulated here as well as proposals such as the New Bottom Line, advocacy for homeland security to be won through a strategy of generosity (our Global Marshall Plan), and our proposed ESRA—Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. But I’m not holding my breath—the absence in the Sanders campaign of the psycho-spiritual perspective articulated in this editorial and through the past three decades in Tikkun, and in the past decade in the work of the Network of Spiritual Progressives, was, in our opinion, one of the critical flaws that made it impossible for Sanders to reach more of those who have suffered from the hidden psycho-spiritual injuries of the ethos of global capitalism.

Sanders, and much of the Left, has not yet been willing to grasp the psycho-spiritual crisis facing most Americans—they see the economic deprivation but they do not speak to the more complex feelings of pain and self-blame, and they react to any talk of a spiritual yearning for a world of love with incredulity and dismiss these thoughts as ‘psychobable’ or worse, a slippery slope toward the religious world they have long rejected.

For Sanders’s movement to still be successful, the Left needs to draw on the model and wisdom of the women’s movement that created small consciousness-raising groups that both helped women see the ways in which their personal struggles were in fact a product of the patriarchal society in which they lived and empowered them to challenge the systems and structures that undermined their freedom and power. Our Network of Spiritual Progressives’ consciousness-raising groups would likewise help people understand both how their personal struggles are often largely (not totally and always) a result of the capitalist system in which they live and not due to their own shortcomings and failures (think of a 12-step program to overcome capitalism) and also help them explore what a world (both their work worlds and their personal lives) would look like if they were governed by the New Bottom Line, as well as teach the empathy skills so desperately needed to reach across the political and cultural divide.

This endeavor may well be dismissed by many activists as a distraction from winning the next mini-battle. Even the larger goal of seeking to build a political party of love and justice may seem both fanciful and impossible. Yet the consciousness raising now, and the building of a love-and-justice oriented political party in the future, are exactly what is needed. I fear that the supposed radicals and revolutionaries are stuck in their own variant of subservience to that which is—the realities of the world as presently constituted—and hence are not really visionary, radical, or revolutionary enough.

Without a movement that combines the New Bottom Line and resistance to racism and xenophobia with a compassionate and empathic approach to those with whom we disagree, and without an explicit embrace of the ideal of a world governed by love and generosity, caring for each other and the earth, and awe and wonder at the grandeur of this incredible universe we are unlikely to stop the growth of hate-filled movements which are likely to play an important role regardless of who wins the 2016, 2018 mid-term, or 2020 presidential elections. Resisting hate-oriented movements and the racism/xenophobia they promote is absolutely necessary, and yet a huge distraction from the fundamental challenge facing the human race: to stop the systematic destruction of the life-support system of the planet. That is why it is so very important for the message of spiritual progressives to permeate the Left so that it can effectively counter these destructive movements and simultaneously shift the focus to overcoming the competitive marketplace whose ethos of endless growth and expansion of consumption is at the heart of the assault on the environment. And that is why the task of building and rapidly expanding a Network of Spiritual Progressives, [**www.spiritualprogressives.org**](http://www.spiritualprogressives.org/), Tikkun’s movement aiming at consciousness change of the sort described in this editorial, is the most important thing we can accomplish in the next ten years. Please join—let’s build this together!

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