**From Politeness to Passion**

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Several years ago, there was a meeting of religious shareholders, investment managers and other institutional investors with the then CEO of Wal-Mart, H. Lee Scott Jr., who was invited by members of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR). The session followed efforts by shareholders during the past few years to engage Wal-Mart on numerous issues.

The format was simple enough. Investors would ask questions. Mr. Scott would answer. The questions covered a broad span of topics and issues: sourcing practices, environmental health and safety, wages and benefits, building of stores on sites sacred to indigenous peoples, etc. The expectation was that answers would truly be provided…and that those answers would somehow move the issues forward.

What happened was a study in the misuse of language to obfuscate, to distract, to seem to say something while saying nothing substantial. Yet buried within the avalanche of words that flowed so smoothly was the reality that the askers and the listeners needed to have engaged in a different type of preparation for the asking of the questions and for the meeting itself.

The first preparation should have addressed the issue of politeness, the trained, inbred politeness of the askers as well as the formal politeness of the CEO of the largest company in the world. It is difficult to ask the hard questions and still maintain the facade of politeness. It is even more difficult to transform questions and answers to true dialogue. How can we learn to see that it is not impolite to question? How can we come to the important understanding that it is impolite to not question, to not challenge when the information we are being given speaks of partial truth, of twisted understanding and of questionable morality?

To not question injustice is immoral. To remain silent is to assent to the injustice. There! I’ve said it. We need to say it to ourselves and say it to each other and then support one another when we put our questions into the public forum.

When we have the power to be able to ask questions, we must ask ourselves: On whose behalf are we questioning? To be able to question is a form of power. On whose behalf are we willing to use the power we have in order to bring truth to the light? In preparing ourselves to question, what starting points are we willing to explore, to use?

We are called to transform our faith believing to a way of life that includes the ability and willingness to raise questions…and seek answers that will bring about a more just society and a more just world.

An example. When asked about the wages and benefits provided by Wal-Mart to its employees, Mr. Scott cited one store where the percentage of workers qualifying for Medicaid decreased 25% over the first six months of the store being operative. This may seem like a great advance BUT the following core questions needed to be asked (but were not, out of politeness and the lack of space for true dialogue). Question 1: Why should any worker at Wal-Mart be paid so little that he/she would qualify for Medicaid? Question 2. After working for 6 months, why were ANY workers still qualifying for Medicaid?

When queried about sourcing practices, i.e. the factories around the world where Wal-Mart buys their products, and about the wages, benefits, working conditions, etc. in those factories, Mr. Scott’s response was that he believed in cost effectiveness and efficiency….which translates into the reality that he believes in paying the least for every item that Wal-Mart purchases… which translates into lower costs for consumers and greater shareholder value…and workers around the world who are being pushed into producing faster and faster to satisfy a higher production quota and more to simply earn the minimum wage in the producing countries.

The list of concerns with Mr. Scott’s presentation could go on and on, but the deeper question is how do we all get better at using language and dialogue to address the issues of our time. The use of repetitive phrases to obfuscate (there’s that word again) continues to be a problem.

Many of the questions addressed to Mr. Scott are really about family values, that is, those values that are key to the sustainability of any family: wages, working conditions, working hours, health care coverage, full-time employment, etc. However, when we most often hear the term “family values” we hear it in relationship to a small set of issues and nothing else. So here we have a challenge. How do we begin a real dialogue about family values, about each and all of those issues that affect families on a daily basis? There’s no difference between a salaried worker and an hourly worker if the hours that they need to work make it almost impossible for them to be home with their children, their families, on a regular basis.

Years ago when I first studied theology someone coined the expression ”pelvic theology” for those issues which seem to be occupying such a large percentage of our time and attention to the exclusion of other issues. The truth is that our theology and spirituality needs to attend to the entire person, and the entire family.

So here is my challenge to all of us. For the next three months, can we try to build a real discussion of family values, values that relate to the entire person and the entire family…and by extension to the entire community?

The chances for discussions are many, the topics varied. No one should be bored. Pick your topic and try it. There are proposed cuts in health benefits for veterans…including the myriad men and women returning from Afghanistan and Iraq. There are the proposed 50% cuts in Section 8 housing, the program that makes apartments affordable. There are the proposed roll-backs in the environmental protection regulations regarding chemicals, including mercury (a known poison).

There are the cuts in Medicaid funding…not just for medical assistance but the funding that keeps many of our elder care residences (nursing homes, assisted living centers, etc.) and programs going. There are the cutbacks in education funding and in college aid support at the same time as there is still the demand for “no child being left behind”.

And there is the national debt. No, not just the budget deficit from this year but also the national debt. The national debt is what we, as a country, owe collectively because of past years and years of deficits that have accumulated. The interest on this debt needs to be paid. That interest, and debt interferes with the many programs, including education, that should be part of family life in the US.

And then finally, what happens when we expand our discussion of “family values” to families beyond the US. How much income does a family need for a decent standard of living? For a Sustainable Living (SLW) Wage? Do the men and women picking fruits and vegetables in the US earn enough to be able to support their families and have a decent standard of living here in the US? Why not? Who decides?

The topics are many. The choice is yours. Move beyond politeness to passion. Take back the power of language and ideas and the call to justice. It is the way to truth and the light.