Divest the Rest: Students and Civil Disobedience

By Rev. Geoff Browning, Campus Minister

The students at Stanford have no doubt about the risk of global warming. They know that they and their children and their children’s children will experience its increasingly dire effects. That is why they have mobilized the most effective student group for change that Stanford has seen in thirty years. In less than three years of Fossil Free Stanford’s existence, they have garnered the support of 379 faculty and persuaded Stanford’s Board of Trustees to divest from coal. Now they are asking the trustees to “divest the rest” from petroleum and natural gas. To emphasize the urgency of this issue, they risked arrest by camping out in front of President Hennessy’s office for a week.

Stanford was the first major university in the country to divest from coal. According to one of the organizers, Josh Lappen, the students are frustrated that as the United Nations Conference on Climate Change (aka COP21) approaches in late November, Stanford is stuck in the rut of studying the issue in their Special Committee on Responsible Investment (SCRI). Stanford is a world-renowned leader in science and technology, including the climate science that confirms the reality of global warming. For these students it is all the more frustrating and ironic that Stanford is unwilling to be a leader in divestment, knowing that fossil fuel investments are imperiling the earth.

The University issued a notice to the protestors threatening them with arrest and saying in part, “As a Stanford student, you are expected to comply with all university policies and failure to do so is grounds for referral to the Office of Community Standards for disciplinary review under the Fundamental Standard.” But the students were not intimidated by this notice, and they replied to the administration that it is the Board of Trustees that are violating the Fundamental Standard:

The Fundamental Standard states that we must “show…such respect for order, morality, personal honour and the rights of others as is demanded of good citizens.” Further, Stanford’s founding grant and mission statement establish that the University should “promote the public welfare by exercising an influence in behalf of humanity and civilization.” By choosing to continue to invest in the fossil fuel industry, thereby fueling climate destruction and environmental injustice, you are in violation of the Fundamental Standard. As a member of the Stanford Board of Trustees, you are expected to uphold our University’s values and listen to the overwhelming consensus of the Stanford Community. In order to comply with Stanford University’s mission and Fundamental Standard, you must immediately divest from the rest of the fossil fuel industry. The student body and Stanford community are instructing you to do so.

I’m grateful that I had an opportunity to participate with the students in this rally and demonstration several times this week. A couple of the organizers contacted me to request that clergy join them. Much of what I do on campus is less about running a program than it is about coming alongside the students, building relationships, hanging out with them and supporting their ongoing work for justice and peace. They even organized “teach-ins” that some of us may recall from the sixties. At their invitation, I led a teach-in on liberation theology. I believe this is how we can and must continue to reach out to the Millennial generation, to let them know that our faith tradition is not only relevant but essential to their lives and the world we are striving to create together. Your ongoing support is necessary in making sure they hear this message.
Disarming our Hearts

Reflections on the trip to Nicaragua

By Rehan Adamjee ('16)

I think I speak for everyone when I say that Progressive Christians at Stanford has had a stimulating quarter. We kicked off the quarter with a Bread and Belonging (B&B) vegetarian dinner and discussion in which we recounted how we encounter God in our daily lives. We found that some of us connect to him through theater, some of us through doing service, and some of us in silent meditation. I was grateful to lead my first B&B the following week, and I pulled quotes from Mairead Corrigan, the Dalai Lama, and Shirin Ebadi to explore spirituality in social movements. In the process, we explored how religion has been abused for political gain, how it has guided Tibetan non-violent resistance, and how it can keep us grounded in compassion and action.

A big theme in my life lately has been acceptance and disarmament. Mairead Corrigan has claimed, “As our hearts are disarmed by God of our inner violence, they become God’s instruments for the disarmament of the world.”

I have been trying to see how I arm myself in certain situations—an argument with a friend, an argument with my mom, or feeling viscerally upset when someone says something that rubs me the wrong way. My instinct is to put on my armor and aim my weapon, but I have realized that there are a million times in my life in which God could have done the same to me and condemned me. But he hasn’t. So I feel an obligation to do the same for others in those tense situations. By no means is it easy: I struggle to live by that each day, but, as with anything, it becomes easier with practice and gratitude. Most of all, it is something I believe in, specifically with respect to mass incarceration and capital punishment.

A second crucial idea was expressed by Professor Tom Sheehan, who argued that our educations should – but often don’t – train us to stand on the side of those who are losing. Both Tom’s quote and one of Oscar Romero’s speeches, The Long View, hang on my wall and greet me as I start my day.

I will leave you with a quote from Bryan Stevenson’s Just Mercy, the subject of the second B&B I led: “The power of just mercy is that it belongs to the undeserving. It’s when mercy is least expected that it’s most potent—strong enough to break the cycle of victimization and victimhood, retribution and suffering. It has the power to heal the psychic harm and injuries that lead to aggression and violence, abuse of power, mass incarceration.” I think this is what our society needs the most today and I am happy that PC@S shares that worldly vision with me as well.

The trip welcomed individuals of any faith – and the group certainly had much diversity of religious background, which we often brought up as we expressed ideas during our late-night reflection sessions. Yet, for a change, one’s own religious background – or lack of it – was not used as grounds for exclusion. Sometimes, faith was an entry point into understanding one’s struggles, and at other times, it played only a marginal role in the discussion. These struggles ranged from experiences of individuals trying to organize farmworkers in California to the fight for Palestinian and native rights. It didn’t matter which faith we came from: rather, it was the universal experience or, sometimes, a particular understanding of struggle that made for riveting and -- at times – deeply emotional and difficult conversation.

Today, many of the ideas I express on a daily basis and the way I choose to approach my last few months on campus are drawn from the thinking I engaged in – the clarity of which is unrivaled – during my time in Nicaragua. Both as a memory and an exposure to a range of theoretical and spiritual constructs, Nicaragua stands as important reservoir to draw upon when cynicism and frustration creep in at every waking moment.

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Why Divinity School?  

By David Patino (’14)

During my junior year at Stanford, I had two major realizations. First, in my Issues in Liberation: El Salvador class, I discovered the concept of liberation theology: both the liberation of theology and liberation from theology. By liberation from theology, I realized that we can let go of old theological paradigms that no longer work for us or have lost their relevance. Just when I had given up believing that religion could have meaning for me, I rediscovered my faith in Christian liberation theology. I discovered the liberation theology of the late 60’s and 70’s, black theology, feminist theology, and queer theology. These texts, along with the leaders and families we met in El Salvador, reminded me of the lessons of humility, resistance, and radical love that I had learned as a young child from my religious grandmother. Shortly after returning from El Salvador, I had my second major realization: that I am genderqueer. Despite my dedication to creating a space for queer people to talk about their connection and experiences with religion through Queerituality, as well as this new-found hope in liberation theology, my world came crashing down. I questioned whether my trans identity was immoral, unnatural, and sinful.

As I tried to reconcile with my Christian tradition after El Salvador, I explored meaning in other approaches like meditation, psychic practices, and indigenous spiritual practices. In all of those spiritual experiences, gender was always placed as an integral part of connecting to God and to connecting with one’s own spirit. At each ceremony or class that I attended there were different ways for women and men to offer their prayers. And those spiritual leaders questioned the legitimacy of my gender identity and my ability to reach higher consciousness because of it. These were painful reminders of how as trans people we have been erased from history, religion and spiritual practices.

Still, I believe that we, as transgender people, are intimately connected to God’s truth. I feel called to create more inclusive spiritual spaces to engage in compassionate dialogue, community building, and healing. Academically, divinity school will help me form a deeper understanding of how faith traditions, morality, colonialism and patriarchy have shaped contemporary religious practices. And equally as urgent, I hope to redefine my ministry and center it in queer spirituality and liberation theology through the field education component that divinity school offers.

Queerituality Update

Progressive Christians at Stanford is working to build bridges between religious/spiritual and LGBTQ communities through Queer Interpretations of Scripture (QIS) and Queerituality. QIS holds biweekly meetings focusing on the intersection of being religious/spiritual and LGBTQ. At the start of each quarter, we conduct a survey to find out what topics people are most interested in discussing and try to plan our meetings accordingly. In the past, we have discussed topics including interpretations of scripture, how to approach discussions with non-affirming family and friends, and the history of LGBTQ involvement in religious/spiritual organizations.

Queerituality is a larger group that is also focused on the intersection of being religious/spiritual and LGBTQ. We host a number of events each quarter. In the past, we have held panels, screened films, compiled a guide to Stanford religious/spiritual organizations for incoming LGBTQ students, and participated in discussions with other religious/spiritual organizations on campus. Again, we try to select activities based on member interest and the needs we see on campus. We are currently in the process of planning a service project.

I have been encouraged by recent progress and increasing acceptance nationwide of LGBTQ religious/spiritual people. The past few years have seen a number of landmark decisions including, but certainly not limited to, those by the US Supreme Court and my own denomination, Presbyterian Church USA. I feel truly grateful to live in this time. These changes, however, have left many non-affirming people feeling upset and confused. I believe these sentiments often stem from a lack of contact with and understanding of LGBTQ people. Through QIS and Queerituality, we hope to raise awareness that identifying as LGBTQ is not inconsistent with being religious or spiritual.
Uncle Sam Still Wants You  By The Rev. Geoff Browning

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There are many things that you needed to do to get ready for the beginning of school, but I’ll bet that registering for the draft was not on your list. Are you aware that you are still required by law to register for the draft? I can hear your incredulity detector going off from here. “We have an all-volunteer military,” you say, “so the draft is an anachronism from WWII and the Vietnam War.” And you would be right, except that in 1980, as a nod to Cold War readiness, President Carter reinstituted the requirement for all males 18-26 years of age to register with the Selective Service. Women are exempt from this law.

In order to coerce participation, the government has enacted punitive laws that can deny, among other things, federal financial aid to college students and employment with the federal government. And if that weren’t enough, it is a federal felony with the potential of a $250,000 fine and up to five years in jail.

So most young men comply with this requirement without a second thought. But in so doing, you may be missing an opportunity to decide for yourself whether you actually believe in war and violence. One of the most important things you can do for yourself and the world is learn to listen to and trust your own conscience. Many who have neglected their consciences are now suffering what psychologists have begun to call “moral injury.”

Whether you agree or disagree with the wars in the Middle East, this requirement for young men to register for the draft presents you with an opportunity. Amidst all the shoot-em-up video games, the cycle of mass shootings in the media and our overall culture of violence, what do you actually believe about violence and war? Do you believe in the myth of redemptive violence, that violence can ultimately save us? Or do you, like Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, believe that violence is a “descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy”? Or perhaps you haven’t really taken the time to think about any of this before. And why would you? Our culture does not encourage you to explore such questions or your own conscience. And the Selective Service does not make this easy either. All the students that I’ve spoken with express concern like that of Dan Walls (PhD candidate), “As I think back, I ask myself the question of how I could have made a decision with literally life-altering potential so lightly. In my case, the absence of an honest assessment of conscience and conversation at the time of my enrollment troubles me.”

As a young man who is required by law to register with the Selective Service, you have three options. First, you can comply with the law, register with the Selective Service and call it a day. You may have already done this and are comfortable with your decision. Second, you could refuse to comply and just don’t register. If you don’t intend to take advantage of federal student loans or work for the government, this isn’t an irrational decision. The government does not go out of their way to enforce this law so the risk of prosecution is very small. However, be prepared for what happened to Malachi Dray (’16) who, when he delayed registration, received a menacing letter from the government. The third option is to comply with the law by registering as a conscientious objector or CO. A person’s choice to be a CO can be, but does not need to be, the result of religious conviction, as long as it is a “firm, fixed and sincere objection to participation in war.” Brian Baum (PhD candidate) wishes that he had more information before registering, including the option to register as a CO.

So I encourage both men and women to explore your consciences and what you actually believe about the use of war and violence. Find those who are exploring these questions and do the soul searching that such a decision deserves. If you have not yet registered, decide which option works best for you. And even if you have registered, and you would like to explore other options, it is not too late.