

# **PREPARING FOR A POLITICS OF MEANING MOVEMENT**

## **Remarks for Plenary: The Deprivation of Meaning in America at The Summit on Ethics and Meaning**

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**by**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Jewish tradition teaches that Jews had to wander in the desert for 40 years until they were ready as a people to move from enslavement to freedom. It will be that challenging for people to move from living a politics of materialism to living a politics of meaning. We need to put at least as much attention on preparing people for this transformation as we do on developing the vision of a politics of meaning.

I would like to offer four principles to guide this essential period of preparation.

### **PRINCIPLE #1: We must break the addictive habit of seeking comfort.**

I do not just mean material comfort. We are all caught in the habit of seeking emotional comfort, and even identity and religious-based comfort. Seeking comfort as our primary life goal will keep us living small lives. I saw this principle at work this past year when I attended the United Nation's Women's Conference in China. Here we were, the largest, most powerful delegation of women assembled in the history of the world. I attended groundbreaking sessions in which Muslim fundamentalists were in dialogue with Muslim feminists; I witnessed Asian, Jewish, and Black women from four continents, who reached past all the barriers of language and culture to get closer to each other. Yet, my Western sisters struggled, because we did not have flush toilets. We slept in hotel rooms with dusty cement floors. We found it difficult to get from one session to another. Here we were with the major women leaders from around the world and every day I listened to Western women complain about the food, the beds, and the transportation. Perhaps we all need to spend some time in Africa and Asia, so we can understand how much we have all succumbed to the seeking of comfort as the guiding principle in our lives. Seeking comfort cannot guide us, or we will end up with a small, Western vision for the politics of meaning.

### **PRINCIPLE #2: We must have a deliberate, systematic process for emotional healing.**

We cannot sustain a politics of meaning unless we can create enough opportunities for us to unnumb, grieve, and let our hearts break about the absence of meaning in our lives. Consciousness raising groups are not enough. Merely talking is not emotional healing work.

After the second bomb exploded during the recent series of attacks on buses in Israel, I spent the week calling friends and colleagues in Israel. I called to offer myself as a friend outside of Israel who could offer healing time to people who needed to cry for hours and face the enormous terror and discouragement. I listened to one particular friend, Sara. For the past two years, she had been leading some of the most courageous work, meeting weekly with right-wing Jewish settlers in the West Bank, giving them a place to be listened to and to heal their fears. When the second bomb exploded, her eight and ten-year-old boys came to her after watching hours of horrible news reports on TV. They said, "Mommy, we won't ever talk to an Arab again." It took 10 hours over a period of a week, letting Sara sob about what was happening with her boys, before she could even consider continuing to take leadership to back the peace process. Sara did not need to talk out her concerns. She did not need to strategize about what to do next. She needed a friend who was willing to be with her while her heart broke.

We cannot underestimate how our lives have been ruined by not being able to live lives of meaning. We are going to need hundreds of hours to grieve the loss. Otherwise, we will not be capable of sustaining a new vision. We might be able to begin, but we will not be able to sustain our efforts without healing the wounds of the past. Why must we face so much of this past grief? Because when we are not willing to face the grief from the past, we are too susceptible to returning to the errors of the past.

**PRINCIPLE #3: We must reclaim courage.**

We cannot build a politics of meaning with people who are acting on their fears. I was in South Africa the week the South African government released Nelson Mandela from prison. I was there to lead a session at a ground breaking conference on building the New South Africa. Members of the African National Congress, the security police, and youth leaders from Black townships were in attendance. Twenty minutes before the session, a bomb exploded in a hotel a block away from the conference site. I was terrified. I knew I was facing a daunting task, and I didn't know if I was up to the challenge. I somehow found the courage to walk into that hostile room.

I will never forget the South African leader who said to me that week, "Cherie, we don't need skills in prejudice reduction, conflict resolution or coalition building. What we need is to learn how to reclaim courage. "Inspired by the courage I witnessed in South Africa, I returned home and launched a new program in my own organization. For the past five years, every leadership session in NCBI has incorporated a healing session on reclaiming courage and breaking through the barriers from the past that keep us from being courageous. We will not be able to build a politics of meaning unless we identify and then heal the fears that prevent us from acting boldly, no matter how scared we are.

**PRINCIPLE #4: We must end the mistreatment of leaders.**

Ending the mistreatment of leaders is a prerequisite for building a politics of meaning. In the current political climate leaders are open game, ready targets for attacks. If we don't learn how to support all the many leaders who will emerge as part of a politics of meaning movement, our efforts will not succeed. Several years ago, when I was leading Catholic-Protestant reconciliation work in Northern Ireland, I met with the two women who had initiated Northern Ireland's Women's Peace Movement. They had been so badly attacked and emotionally destroyed--mostly by women from within their own movement--that they were unable to continue leading. The Women's Peace Movement died. I am convinced that had they received the support they needed from other women, we would not have had to wait so long for hopeful signs of peace in Northern Ireland.

Learning from the experience of my Northern Irish sisters, I came home and incorporated into every training program in my organization a session where leaders learned specific skills on how to cherish other leaders, how to build support for themselves as leaders, and how to recognize and interrupt leadership attacks. One of the principles I've come to understand through our work on leadership oppression is that under the guise of offering constructive criticism we too often are simply rehearsing our own powerlessness. It is a cheap shot to attack someone else's efforts rather than doing the hard work of taking initiative and modeling an alternative program.

Michael Lerner, for example, has been a leader who takes enormous risks. He is willing to put himself out there with challenging and controversial ideas. Because his ideas are that visible, he gets routinely attacked. I've witnessed this cycle over the years, and I made a personal decision that I would never allow anyone in my presence to attack Michael. We must all make the same firm commitment to back each other's leadership fully--to give each other room to experiment and to try new things out, even when we don't completely agree with each others' programs. We must adopt a correct attitude towards leaders -- that leaders are to be cherished, even though they're not perfect. We need a thousand new leaders, not a thousand criticisms of any one leader. Ending leadership oppression has to be a central component of building a politics of meaning.

## **CONCLUSION**

Yes, we have come here this week to share a vision. But we have preparatory work to do.

- (1) We must break the addictive habit of seeking comfort.**
- (2) We must have a deliberate, systematic process for emotional healing.**
- (3) We must reclaim courage.**
- (4) We must end the last unchallenged oppression, the mistreatment of leaders.**