GREATER CLEVELAND – A CRISIS OF SPIRIT AND OF WILL

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Connect, Create, Change Conference
August 15, 2008

A few years ago, I learned about a visioning exercise that I now call "27 post-its." It's really very simple. You take 27 post-it notes, spend 27 minutes, and write down 27 hopes and dreams for your life. Then you attach them to a wall or tabletop and begin to analyze the propositions, patterns and potential in your personalized set of post-its.

You can apply this exercise to just about anything:

Aspirations I want in a job
Traits I'm looking for in a mate
Requirements for an employee
Things I need in a college or university
Characteristics I want in a house
Qualities for a place I want to live

I can attest to the fact that this exercise changes lives. I use it now as a part of pre-martial counseling.

In preparation for this talk, I did the post-it exercise: 27 things I like about Cleveland. At the end of the process, I ran out of post-it notes. For me Cleveland has almost everything I want in a city where I live and work.

1. Natural resources – especially fresh water
2. Interesting neighborhoods
3. Good, affordable housing stock
4. Excellent health care
5. Good universities and colleges
6. Accessible, affordable and outstanding art and culture
7. Parks and recreation
8. Easy commuting and good parking
9. Religious diversity
10. Decent airport
11. Good public radio
12. Affordable cost of living
13. Generous philanthropic community
14. Interesting restaurants
15. Farmers markets
16. Easy access to the countryside
17. Good movie theaters
18. Bookstores
19. Ethnic diversity

20. Manageable size
21. Feasts, festivals and fairs
22. Professional sports
23. Friends and family
24. Great photo ops, good photo stores, and a strong photography community
25. Cool people
26. Gritty city
27. Perfectly decent weather in a four-season climate

So what's the problem with Cleveland? Why can't we stop the brain drain? Why can't we turn this city and our region around? What keeps us off of the "best city" lists compiled by *Money Magazine, CNN, Black Enterprises, Living Well, America's Most Livable Communities*, and other magazines and websites? Why can we be the best (or among the best) city to live in; the best city to launch from; the best city for the under-25 bunch; the best city for women; the best city for African Americans; or even, the best city for poor people? What list are we on? *Forbes'* "fastest dying cities in the country."

We can argue about whether this is a fair rating, but if we're honest with ourselves, we all know the facts, the truth about our city and its environs. Since one of my old bishops said, we have to hear the bad news before the good news, let's review some facts:

Population loss – 16,000 since 2000. Almost every Sunday, another young adult moving away for job opportunities greets me.

Poverty – While NEO has some of the highest per capita income communities in the nation; Cleveland is one of the nation's poorest cities with nearly 30% of the population living in poverty.

Unemployment – Our unemployment rate is 5.9% (almost twice the nation's average), and we have a very low growth rate jobs and per capita income. Moreover, we repeatedly are told how jobs are not filled because of an unqualified, local workforce. The bottom line is clear: we are terribly out-of-alignment when it comes to our employment opportunities and our workforce qualifications. But it is correctable.

Children at-risk – Nearly 43% of Cleveland's children are living in poverty, and despite one of the finest children's hospitals in the nation, our infant mortality rate is more than double the national average.

Education – Only 55% of all Cleveland Metropolitan School District students graduate from high school, and some of our suburban schools aren't doing much better. Furthermore, over 25% of our city's adults don't have high school diplomas. Yet, it's ironic that metropolitan Cleveland has a large number of excellent, independent private and parochial schools.

Pollution – In spite of the fresh northern breezes coming off of Lake Erie, Metropolitan Cleveland ranks in the bottom 10 SMSA's of the nation for air quality. Though not dead, Lake Erie is one of the most polluted bodies of fresh water.

Unhealthy Population – Despite having some of the finest medical facilities in the world, we rank 4th highest in the nation for obesity and 9th in the nation for heart disease among women. Furthermore, 17% of our population is at-risk for future medical problems, earning us the proud rank of #1 in the nation.

So what's up? Why can't we get a handle on this situation? Why can't we become one of the most livable, most exciting cities, most creative, most sustainable, and healthiest cities in the nation – perhaps, in the world? What is holding us back?

I do not believe the distress of Greater Cleveland is due to a lack of resources: human, financial, natural or physical. After all, we sit on the 12th largest body of fresh water in the world. Combining all the Great Lakes, we are home to the largest reservoir of fresh water in the world – a resource that in this century will be more precious and scarce that we can possibly imagine. If we could only become a center of fresh water sustainability for the hydrogen economy – just imagine the economic boom in our city and its region.

Water made Cleveland great once – why not now? The Leadership Cleveland Class of 2003 proposed an initiative called H_2Ohio to promote economic development, define a sense of place, attract and retain talented people and preserve our most valuable natural asset through the sustainable and creative use of fresh water in all sectors of our economic and social life.

As we considered H_2Ohio, the possibilities were endless:

- Water-dependent industries
  Food processing, pharmaceuticals, water filtering, shipping
- Hydrogen-based business
  Fuel cells and thermal power
- Fresh water management
  Reclamation, preservation, purification, treatment
- Water-based health treatments and technology
- Water-related medical research
- Water sports and recreation
- New forms of local and regional water transportation
  High-speed water shuttles, ferries, taxis, hydrofoils and planes
- Water-saving construction technique and applications
  Energy-efficient plumbing, storm water discharge systems, Geo-thermal HVAC systems, and adaptive grey water reuse
- Water-based consumer products
  Beer, personal care, cleaning products
- Water as a medium and image for local art and culture

If we put our collective resources together, we could develop and promote the entire region – with Cleveland as its center – as an international center for sustainable fresh water resource management and utilization. Can you imagine?

- A Design District featuring water-based products
- A Center for Fresh Water Research and Development on Lake Erie
- Public art featuring the icon of water
- The Cleveland Orchestra performing Handel's "Water Music"
- Traveling across the east/west Cleveland border on a water taxi or visiting Canada, Detroit, Toledo, Erie or Buffalo on a high-speed ferry

We have a blue-collar workforce that could become a green-collar workforce in industries such as:

- Energy retrofitting
- Green building
- Green waste composting
- Deconstruction
- Constructing and installing solar panels
- Erecting Wind turbines
- Brewing biofuels
- Building hybrid cars
- Recycling and manufacturing with recycled materials
- Urban farming and food production
- Hazardous materials management
- Non-toxic commercial printing;
- And all the water-related industries that I just mentioned

With the potential of our public schools, research universities, and community college, why not raise up a pace-setting green workforce?

We have land – lots of it – that could be turned into creative urban farms and city parks. Might we want to consider living as a smaller and smarter city that features locally grown food, flowers and fuel cells? We have a fiber optics highway. Why not use it fully and become a wireless city? And I haven't begun to talk about the future of medicine, healthcare and biosciences in this city.

I think the no-longer quiet crisis of Greater Cleveland is not about capacity, assets or resources. **Ours is a crisis of spirit and of will**, and one simple question lies at the heart of it all. Are we – everybody – rich, poor and middle-class; urban and suburban; black, white, Hispanic and Asian; native and newcomer; gay and straight; and young, old and middle-aged – willing to do what it takes to turn this city and its suburbs into a thriving, exciting, creative, sustainable, and living metropolitan area?

The Greek philosopher Plato wrote in *The Republic* about the ideal city or the polis as one based on the intersection of justice and human virtue. It was a form of social and political organization that allowed individuals to maximize their potential, serve their fellow citizens, and live in accordance with universal laws and truths of goodness. According to Plato, the ideal city is an enlightened city, one based on the highest universal principles – those that promote the common good.[1]

The intersection of sustainability and justice is the decision, the determination, and the will to promote the common good or destroy it. To begin this exploration, let's consider the premise of the commons as articulated by writer, thinker, environmentalist and economist Jonathan Rowe:

> The commons is the vast realm that lies outside of both the economic market and the institutional state, and that all of us typically use without toil or price. The atmosphere and oceans, languages and cultures, the stores of human knowledge and wisdom, the informal support systems of community, the peace and quiet we crave, the genetic building blocks of life – these are all aspects of the commons.[2]

This definition of the commons invokes a sense of stewardship. No one permanently owns the commons; we only tend, enjoy and reside in it on a temporary basis. When you visit a public park or a beach, you can picnic or camp, but you can't build a house, and you're expected to carry out what you brought in.

I feel that way about the Lake upon whose shore I now reside. My partner Emily and I are stewards of the Lake Erie. Privileged to live on its coastline, we are responsible for its well being, and that includes its cleanliness, its accessibility, and the protection of its water for the common good. Frankly, for this reason, I am happy to pay annual rent to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources for the land on which my rock reinforcement sits, and I am delighted with the passage of the Great Lakes Pact. And, for this reason, I worry about the proprietary attitudes expressed by some lakeshore residents.

A 1968 article by Garrett Hardin, entitled *The Tragedy of the Commons*, summarized how the commons can be damaged and destroyed when it becomes scarce or overused.[3] In medieval England, many villages were built around a common grazing pasture. As the population grew and people tried to maximize their family wealth with more livestock, this common land frequently was over-grazed. Putting more animals there benefited each family in the short term, but doing so eventually ruined the field for all. Over the course of time, the commons was divided into parcels and sold to individuals. Market economics then took over, and those with more financial resources got a bigger piece of the pie, thus creating "the tragedy of the commons."

Isn't this in many ways what has happened to metropolitan Cleveland?

- Our lakefront is essentially held as private property, accessible to only a few.

- Acres of our urban landscape have been scarred and damaged from centuries of manufacturing and industrial waste.

- Many of our urban neighborhoods (and inner ring suburbs) were chopped up by freeways. As we know from the story of Shaker Lakes, those with more money, education and political clout were better able to control their destiny than those without.

- As the wealthy and middle class moved away from their places of business, the air in urban neighborhoods continued to be polluted by the industry.

- As those with economic resources moved to the newer suburbs, the poor living in the older housing stock were left to struggle with lead paint.

- As those who could afford to do so (including my parents), placed their children (including me and my brother) in excellent private schools or suburban schools funded by local property taxes, the poor and working class were left to deal with older public schools and a declining tax base to support them.

- As the foreclosure crisis came to a head, residents of all kinds of neighborhoods found themselves living next to abandoned houses and apartment buildings.

- The entire region is faced with an aging infrastructure – water pipes and sewer systems; roads, bridges and highways; and empty downtown department stores and suburban shopping malls.

- And so our city spiraled down with our young leaving for more exciting cities, our old moving to warmer climates with lower taxes, and the rest of us either moving further away from the problems of the city and in doing creating the problems of urban sprawl, and the rest of us trying to figure out what to do to turn it around.

Friends, metropolitan Cleveland is a living example of Garrett Hardin's "tragedy of the commons." What's more, that tragedy is more acute now than ever before:

In his new book, *Who's Your City*, Richard Florida argues that:

> 1. Despite all the hype over globalization and the "flat world," place is actually more important to the global economy than ever before.
>
> 2. Places are growing more diverse and specialized—from their economic makeup and job market to the quality of life they provide and the kinds of people that live in them.
>
> 3. We live in a highly mobile society, giving most of us more say over where we live.[4]

If Florida is correct, and I believe he is, then we in Greater Cleveland have got to decide that we will make this a place where people really want to live and where young people (like the Executive Fellows who organized this conference) want to stay. We need a new vision, and we need it now.

So what is that vision and how do we realize it? I think we begin with Plato's call for an enlightened polis re-forming and re-creating itself based on common self-interest. I would propose that our common self-interest begins with the acknowledgement that we're all on the same boat. Some of us may be in steerage and some in first-class, but it's the same boat. Nobody living here is exempt or protected anymore.

- As I recently said to a wealthy parishioner living in Shaker Square who resides in Cleveland because it's affordable, convenient and safe: if we don't deal with the issues of the city, you won't be safe much longer.

- If we don't find a way to restructure local government so that it meets the needs of the metropolis and allows us to equitably fund our public life, we won't be able to stem the tide of population loss.

- If we don't find a way to ensure accessible and affordable health care for everybody in the metropolitan area, and if we can't get people to change their lifestyles, it won't matter that we have the best hospitals in the country.

- If we don't find a way to sustainable but aggressively harness the wind and water of what I believe is our greatest natural asset – Lake Erie – we will miss out on an economic engine, cultural icon, and renewal energy source that could transform one of the fast dying to one of the fastest growing cities and regions in the country.

- If we don't let go of what Parker Palmer coined the "golden age of memory" mentality – believing that the good, old days will return or getting stuck in what Joan Didion called "magical thinking" rewinding "should have, could have, why didn't we" over and over again, while hoping that the problems will solve themselves – we'll continue to decline.

I spent over a decade of my life living and serving in a dead city called Paterson, New Jersey.

I grieved as the last factories closed and made many photographs of the empty silk mills.

I lived through the state take-over of the public school system (the film *Lean on Me* was based on my neighborhood high school).

I picked up garbage along the banks of the polluted Passaic River.

I regularly walked through block after block of abandoned houses.

I listened to one-too-many conversations about Paterson's downtown glory days and how "they" destroyed it.

By the time I left, we were one of the nation's poorest cities (large and small) surrounded by some of the nation's wealthiest suburbs. I don't want to see the same phenomenon happen in Cleveland.

We still have a chance to turn this city and its metropolitan area into a once-again wonderful, exciting, and sustainable place to live, work, and raise our families. It is not too late. But we have to act. I believe it is time for a new vision that will require a new conversation, collaboration and cooperation between people who haven't talked with one another, people who don't even know each other, and people who might not even trust each other.

While preparing for this talk, I came across an initiative call the Bronx Center Project. Its tag-line is "Don't move, Improve"

According to their web site:[5]

> The Bronx Center project, a collaborative, community based plan to revitalize a severely deteriorated 300-block section of the South Bronx, is unprecedented in method and scope. As a multi-discipline plan, The Bronx Center encompasses a gamut of different projects such as economic development, health and human services, education and culture, housing and transportation.
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> The Bronx Center features an approach to addressing urban problems that connects community members, academics, urban development professionals, not-for-profit organizations, local businesses, cultural and social institutions, and city officials/politicians in a problem-solving process that is active and collaborative.

What if we approached the rebuilding of Cleveland in the same manner? What if we were able to have a new conversation that acknowledges the past and present problems without blame and shame, and really attempts to consider best practices and new solutions that might require sacrifice and sharing on the part of us all? And, what if that conversation was centered on sustainable, collaborative and creative economic development and social capital?

As you might imagine, I am a person of prayer and I while I don't take it literally, I do read the Bible. For the past several weeks, my prayer attention has focused on the words of the prophet Joel. Addressed to the community of faith during a terrible environmental crisis (a plague of locusts), the prophet writes: "Blow a trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast; Call a solemn assembly; gather the people…" (Joel 2:15-16) In response to the people, God says: "I am sending you grain, wine and oil and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a mockery among the nations…" (Joel 2:19) The voice of God according

to the prophet continues: "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh your sons and your daughters shall prophesy your old shall dream dreams, and your young shall see visions…"(Joel: 2:28)

As I stand here before you today, I hear the voice of God saying: People of Greater Cleveland – You are living in an environmental and economic crisis. Moreover, you are experiencing a spiritual crisis of urban despair and metropolitan dis-ease. But I have not abandoned you. I am sending you everything you need to be satisfied so that you will no longer be a mockery among cities. For I will pour out my spirit of collective wisdom so that your old shall dream dreams, and your young shall see visions so that you may create a place where people want to live, move and have their being. I want you to rebuild and re-create a city and metropolitan area that will:

Model environmental and economic sustainability

Re-align education and training with the employer needs

Value diversity and inclusion

Promote art and culture

Educate all of its children in good schools

Shelter all of its people in decent, affordable and healthy housing

Protect the safety and dignity of everyone – young and old alike

Provide accessible medical care

Promote health and wellness among its citizenry

Maintain accessible parks and recreational amenities

Encourage smart growth and discourage stupid sprawl

Be connected locally, globally and digitally

Value the center city while honoring the suburbs

Lift up political, business and civic leaders that inspire trust & confidence

Develop a positive energy and attitude about itself and its people

And at the heart of this place—this commons we call Greater Cleveland— is the intersection of human, economic and environmental sustainability and justice. May we have the courage and conviction to realize it before it's too late. Otherwise, I'm going to preside over a beautiful cathedral in a dead city. And I don't want to do that.

[1] "The Ideal City" by Scott London, 2000 (Scottlondon.com)
[2] Jonathan Rowe, "Fanfare for the Commons," *Utne Reader*, January-February 2002
[3] Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science*, 162:1243, 1968
[4] Richard Florida, *Who's Your City*, Basic Books, 2008
[5] The Bronx Center Project - "Don't Move, Improve" (www.unesco.org/most/usa1.htm)