

Looking for a Piece of the Action

By Michael Gottsegen

When was your last IPO? When was your first? Have you dot-commed yourself? How are your abs, your pecs, your stock options, your debt? Your husband's hairline? Your wife's waistline? Will your next SUV make you happier than your last trip to Canyon Ranch? Are you fully alive or dreaming of being fully alive, dreaming a dream spun from celluloid and newsprint, from media buzz and corporate hype?

I pose these questions to get at certain feelings with which most of us are in some measure familiar, the feeling that there is another place, a better place -- another life, a better life - than the one we currently live and know. We are all afflicted in some measure by the sense that the real action or the true life is elsewhere.

It used to be that religions were the guardians and gatekeepers of this elsewhere which they called the world-to-come or the world of redemption. This elsewhere was not merely another place, it was also another time, the after-life. It was also democratic: in principle, there was a place in this world-to-come for all of us if we played by the rules. You did not need to earn a million by thirty, go public by 45, appear on Oprah or be a member of the chattering class to gain admission.

In the modern era, the religious visions of the world-to-come have become untenable for most of us. We still long for fulfillment but want it now. We believe there is a better life, a charmed life, and we imagine it in the very concrete images produced by Hollywood and Madison Avenue. These images are inescapable. We are all affected and infected, all colonized to the very depths of our being by the images of fulfillment that are the stock and trade of the dream factory and its corporate sponsors.

Rumors to the contrary notwithstanding, there is a heaven -- but it's not for you. The latest multimedia version of the American Dream (available on DVD) may tell you otherwise, but it has always played fast and loose with the economic facts.

In his Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, Rousseau observed that social life has long been a competitive search for a scarce commodity: applause, the favor of the crowd, the spotlight. One sought the light and fled obscurity. One wanted to be where the action was if not at the center of the ring. Today it is the same. One wants a piece of the action, one wants to be plugged into the epicenter of our time.

A premium is thus put on being interesting -- and the "interesting" is defined by relation to the consensus as to what is hot and what is not. We want to be interesting to others and interesting to ourselves -- fearing of course that we are

hardly interesting (since we know that the action is someplace else) and fearing that we are not hot -- at least not yet! But can one ever be hot enough, or stay hot long enough? We are after all familiar with the pathetic spectacle of movie stars or politicians who cling to the stage even after their moment has passed, making themselves look ridiculous in the process.

The problem with our common aspiration to be "where the action is" is simple. So long as the action is defined by the gods of capitalism and Hollywood and by the need for applause, "the action" is a scarce good that is by definition unevenly distributed. Not all can be at the center when the center presupposes a periphery. Not all can be among the lucky few when the very idea of a lucky few presupposes the unlucky many. In our other-directed age of centralized and ubiquitous media, one cannot remain inured or immune vis-à-vis this phenomenon. One cannot escape the media's judgment. And it is hard not to feel diminished as a result.

There are social and economic policies that might work to overcome the grossest manifestations of the pathology that infects our society and culture and leaves too many of us feeling -- no matter how much credit card debt we accrue -- that the true life is being lived elsewhere and by somebody else. But I want to focus here upon how Judaism and spirituality more generally can work to overcome the sense of sociological and psychological inferiority or marginality that pervades contemporary society.

Franz Rosenzweig wrote somewhere that every human heart is equally proximate to God. Martin Buber suggested that every soul is a radius that passes through the center that is God. But if God -- or the values by which we live -- is at the center, then no points along the circumference of the circle are intrinsically closer to the center than any other. Or, we might say that every human soul poised along the perimeter of this circle has the same human possibility of moving closer to, or further from, the center by choosing to do good or evil, to realize value or not, to sanctify life or not. This good of proximity to the center -- unlike the light of public attention -- is not a zero-sum good such that if one person has more another must have less. It is a democratic good of the spirit and is as abundant as goodness itself.

Of course religions have their hierarchies and religious institutions are often energized by the same competitive drives for the spotlight as drive contemporary social striving in the secular sphere. But at their root, however, the goods of the spirit are abundant and equally distributed, excluding none and elevating no person over another.

An important social function of religion or of spirituality in every age has been to help us to reshape our understanding of where the action is. Taken to heart, Judaism tells us that the action is here and now and that the action that matters most to me is that action that is within my power. Taken to heart, Judaism tells us

that life is not a spectator sport and not about vicarious participation or envy of another's social possibility. The primary thing is my relationship with the center, a relationship with the center that gives me the potential for creative action, for human connection and for goodness. Taken to heart, this changed relationship to the center of value, of being and of what matters most can be the most therapeutic corrective to the current distortions of social life.

Of course, if religion is to realize this power, we must create the appropriate spiritual forms and pedagogy to teach this liberating lesson. We must remove the hierarchical distribution of power and the unhealthy dynamic of competitive display from our own religious institutions, for where these forms of corruption have taken root these institutions become incapable of effecting the profound reorientation we are describing. Perhaps it is for this reason that Americans today prefer "the religious" (or the spiritual) to the religions (and the denominations), believing that the latter are too caught up in the pathologies of our time and too little in the spirit that wants to be the spirit of individual and social renewal.