

**Edited Selection from the Transcript of Lee Stuart's  
Presentation to the Power Group  
April 20, 2002.**



My name is Lee Stuart, and I am the director Nehemiah Housing Projects in the South Bronx, we're completing 920 houses later this fall. I am very glad to be here because I think that conversation about how do people of God bring [us] a little closer to what our vision is [of] what the reign of God might look like is probably the most critical conversation that can be had today...

What I hope to do today is talk a little about [power as a theological virtue], for me, that is the ultimate theological virtue. It's the one that's missing most; it's the one that, if taught, would give the greatest clarity or the greater clarity [in] giv[ing] them the way in which [to] integrate hope, charity, love, integrity, chastity, sorrow, faith, grace and solidarity, in a way which really makes a difference in the world.

We all have some connection to UVa, I have to admit that, having had a post-doctorate at Virginia Tech, working at the biology department many years ago, and a lovely childhood in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, which is now famous from a book, called "Big Stone Gap"<sup>1</sup>, but I don't know if you've ever been down there in that corner of Virginia, where it hits Kentucky, but that's where my roots very much are.

In terms of the path I took to get here... as well as growing up in South West Virginia, I had a really good experience with the environment, I would say—I always thought that I was going to make my mark in the world and make a difference through the environmental field. I finished a Ph.D. at the University of California, Davis, and San Diego State in 1984 (83-84), with an emphasis on [the ecological] effect of the Alaska Pipeline and the development of the northern environment. I was one of the people who began to put together some of the early growth system models, and also

---

<sup>1</sup> Adriana Trigiani, *Big Stone Gap* Random House, April 2000,

carbon dioxide enhancer models, for what global warming might mean to all of us. So that's my training, that's my tradition, that's how I focus, that's how I think.

And then, when I was finishing my dissertation, my major professor died suddenly in the last year—those of you who are doctoral candidates will understand that this could throw a wrinkle into one's completion plans — [he] died very suddenly. And I did manage to complete the work and go on to Virginia Tech as a post-doc. But in his memory—I was very sad, actually, because I was his most senior student at the time -- his wife and I were finishing up his papers, his work, clearing out his office, and it was like working in a morgue -- it was very terrible. And my mother had always said, “If you're feeling sorry for yourself, go do something for somebody else and get over it.” So with that ringing in my head, I was looking through a newspaper in San Diego, and I saw this little deal where they needed volunteers to help with the UNICEF fundraiser down in Balboa Park, and I thought, “How can I go wrong?”

### *Cooperative*

So off I went, and I met some people there who were connected with various social service and groups, and, they asked me to come volunteer with them at a food program called the Ecumenical Coalition of Concerned Americans in Los Angeles, ECCA. And that was a nifty program where people had bought lots of food in common and it was distributed through churches and unions and institutions--and it was a logistics nightmare. So I said to myself, “Well I can do one better than this.” I understand about the movement of freight, if nothing else [from] ship[ping] stuff back and forth between remote boot camps [in] Alaska. And so my friends and I set up what became the shared food program, *Self Help and Resource Exchange*, which is still the nation's largest self-help food cooperative existing. And I was asked to come set it up.

I set it up in San Diego first, and then I set it up in the Blacksburg area when I went to Virginia Tech, and then I was asked to come to the South Bronx because people had heard about it and were interested in a new approach to food assistance that beat the government cheese lines and soup kitchens and food pantries, something that [has] a little bit more of a justice connotation to it, rather than the demeaning of handouts.

So, I put my academic career on hold and came to the Bronx for six months in March of 1985. I did manage to set up the food program. It still runs. It runs as a self-supporting non-profit organization with an annual budget of over a million dollars. It needs no grant, it has no government money in it, it supports local farmers and growers and the New York State Vegetable Cooperative Growers and the New York-Vermont Apple Growers Cooperative. Helps [a lot] of people, it's just a wonderful thing.

### ***Poverty in the South Bronx***

But what happened when I came here—the Bronx at that time was in a terrible position. The pictures were horrible. The place was burnt down, there were dead people in the street in the morning, that wasn't too uncommon; less than three percent of the kids were going on to college. It was just horrible. And what I realized was that all the goodwill in the world wasn't going to be sufficient to deal with the situation of inner-city poverty as expressed in the South Bronx.

You're talking about solidarity. I found instant solidarity here. Because when I was growing up in Appalachia and left Big Stone Gap, I became aware (and particularly as I matured through my teen years) how that part of the country was a spectacle of the nation's poverty. That's where the welfare level was formed, that's where the idea of passing children down the line for welfare was born. This is where it was taught that poor people didn't love their children, didn't care about education, didn't know how to dress their children, didn't know how to feed their children—were basically just scum of the earth. And the shape of poverty in the 50's and 60's was a white woman living in Appalachia. [That was] completely false, not the right kind of stereotype at all!

When I came here, it took me less than a week to say, "Oh, *this* place is now the nation's spectacle of poverty," except with the added, and very ugly, twist of race. . . . I couldn't do anything about the recuperation of the spectacle of poverty for Appalachia when I was twelve, thirteen or seventeen years old, but I sure as heck wasn't going to let it to go down again for the South Bronx. I made the commitment to myself there, and it was kind of *metanoia* type of thing, where I said that I was going to do whatever was in my power possible to correct what I saw in the South Bronx.

When I set up the share program, I made it run instantly on time, and I swept the floor of the warehouse clean enough so that people could eat off of it! (In contrast to the local supermarket where you had to step through blood to get to the meat.) The conditions were appalling. If all I can do is make the run on time and be clean, [then] this will be the first step in what's required.

### ***Social Hope, Social Justice, and a Theology of Power and Anger***

So, I have really spent the last seventeen years experimenting in lots of different areas about how do you take a community at the bottom of social hope, and work for its transformation? And I'm deeply committed to that in all forms still. I would say that is my declaration of my life--that I am going to investigate that question and use my life in that investigation probably until my last breath. How do you provide social hope, how do you provide space for social justice, in a societal condition which is structured against it?

I was part of no church when I came to the Bronx. I'd been raised a Presbyterian, I'd gone to Quaker school, and here I was adopted by an African American Roman Catholic congregation. So I am, of all weird things a black catholic, [that is] how I look at the Church. . .

*[laughter]*

But that's what I am. I'm not an Irish Catholic, I'm not an Italian Catholic, I am a Black Catholic. And that has very clear theology that I have.

So, as I said before, what I want to do is help reclaim power as a theological virtue and also start a dialogue of power in the Church. And by Church I mean Church at large, whatever we mean by religious institution. The starting point I believe that works is that the world as it is, is clearly not the world as it should be.

The press released last night that Bush doesn't have to cut three thousand jobs in St Louis because South Korea has ordered sixteen billion dollars worth of fighter jets. I'm thinking, "OK, this is good news or bad news?" I thought, "I am glad the people are working; but, the sixteen billion in fighter jets, what's likely to happen in South Korea right now?"

Over here, [all] you have to deal with is power and money. It really is. That's how it works. The world is structured around the exercise of power and money. And what should it be organized around? It should be empowered by love.

And what happens is that people get really goofed up, and a lot of us in the religious sense, live as if this is what really happens. And we get damaged and thrown around and hurt, because love is *not* the currency that makes the world go around right now. I will agree with you that it *ought* to be, but it isn't. And so people either say, "Woe is me" they can be completely cynical, and say, "Well, I can't do anything about that. I 'm not gonna live over there as the world of love." Or they really buy into this.

The most egregious example is a young man I met not long ago who worked for Citibank, who had just come back from Thailand (this is several years ago) where he had been advising the country of Thailand how to minimize disturbances in its Cambodian prison camps so that the Thai government would not be destabilized by prison camp revolts, because they're important for the global economic system. And I said, "Well Mark, how do sleep at night? I mean, you're helping to keep the concentration camps running?"

"Well, it's not like that--they're really important, if there's too much unrest the government of Thailand will be destabilized, and that will affect the whole economic condition of Southeast Asia, which will affect the United States economically."

Yeah, but hear my question, you know you begin to lose [your] moral compass if you begin to worship the power and the money. And the trouble is, what's a world like that's run just by power and money? [It] is nasty, brutal and short probably. [It] says that this is where you can have tyranny and brute force. So you have to somehow figure out how to exert love over you[rself], and that's kind of the role of the Church and moral people.

But what's a world that's run by love? That just gets to be sentimental mush, right? Love doesn't get a lot done. I used to think that I worked because of love of people—I don't. I work because of anger. I am not motivated by love. I have a confession to make. I wish I were motivated by love. There are few things that may be motivated by love. I, in contrast, admit I am motivated more by anger than by love, because I can't make my love do it.

**Houston Roberson:** What would motivate your anger if you didn't have love?

**LS:** Yeah, I'll tell you. I look at the difference between the world as it is and the world as it should be, my emotional state comes out anger.

I've made an [initial reference] to God—which is all powerful and all loving. So I can see a dichotomy. I feel a dichotomy!

I don't like to look at the world this way, but I find, well certainly, if this is the way it seems to be working, and I would like to get it to work a different way, I would try to figure out how to get power over there and love over here. I actually believe that people in impossible situations still have hope and people in impossible situations still have love. I've seen that. So whether or not I would have [anger] if I didn't have any love, I don't know.

I was raised this way, you know with this loving, in a way that's to say my response to this is I want to do something about it. And I would bet that all of you in this room, in some way or other, as teachers or preachers, also have some idea that part of your job is to make the world a better place. Anybody here committed to the *status quo*?

There are three options: you make it worse, you leave it alone or you make it better. Right? In anything! I'm arguing that you ought to make it better. And a key way to make it better is to figure out how to get power over there and love over here.

Otherwise you're never going to get the *world as it is* to be the *world as it should be* unless you exercise some form of power. All the prayer in the world hasn't quite gotten there yet. You know, so we have to figure out ourselves how we can organize power.

**Gerald Schlabach:** I want to ask one question; you have power and money running the world as it is. . .

**LS:** Looks like it to me.

**GS:** You're an environmentalist. How about the using up of energy, the consuming of it. I mean, I have a concern [with] the focus on cities, you want to make cities better—cities are still energy users, exploiting rural areas, the Midwest. I'm concerned about some of those things. If we imagine the world as it should be, if we solve all the problems in the cities of social justice, but we're still draining away from . . .

**LS:** It's a good conversation. It's great to have it in there, and I agree, that the misuse of. [natural resources]. . and the waste of it and all that kind of stuff is one part of the structure of injustice. And [it] remind[s] me that if there's no power, if you don't put power in, you're not going to get any change. If you don't put in power you're going to get entropy, entropy is running down hill, there is no other option for it. You either help it get better, or you help it [go] downhill either through action or inaction. But pulling out of the game makes it run downhill also. And it's that kind of realization that again touches my anger.

So I want to review anger a little bit here, okay. How many people here think anger is not such a hot thing? Anger is another theological virtue—I should have said anger is the best theological virtue to teach.

**Sondra Wheeler:** But anger is like power, it's full of loopholes. It depends on what you're angry at and what you do with it. So, power is a virtue in the sense that the sharpness of a blade can hurt you and it depends on whether you're an axe murderer or a brain surgeon...

**LS:** but how do you teach power to the people who are neither murderers nor brain surgeons?

**SW:** except virtue originally meant power, that's the. . .

**LS:** . . etymology of the word. Yes I know.<sup>2</sup>

**SW:** Not every virtue is a moral virtue. But for something to be a moral virtue is essentially to be a disposition to use power well.

**LS:** So how do you do that in a powerful society? That's what I'm trying to teach. How do you empower, if you will, (using the fairly bad word,) peoples to make that claim on their own power?

And I would say one avenue to do that is to look at anger. The etymology of this word? It comes from *anqr* an old Norse word meaning "grief" and "sadness." I always wondered why I cried when I got really mad, until I learned that *anqr* comes from grief. So that the grief is from something that's missing, something that's not there, something the world has missed, that is different, that it is not as it should be. And unfortunately in

---

<sup>2</sup> **vir.tue Etymology:** Middle English *virtu*, from Old French, from Latin *virtut-*, *virtus* strength, manliness (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary)

our society, if its not everywhere around the world right now, you will find two main ways in which anger gets expressed: One is, I would call it an *apathetic* way, and one I would call *violent*—neither of which gets you to that point of possibility. Apathy is so often, but not always, self-destructive; and violence is often, but not always, destructive to others.

### ***Action ‘For’ not ‘Against’***

What we’re trying to figure out is how can we get this to be action, how can we get it to be, how can we take anger and move it into action. And the idea is actions that build, actions *for*, not *against*. Even inside social movements an awful lot of anger is focused on protest. Protest doesn’t build a damn thing; protest stops stuff. And until you start working *for* something, you can be *against* something forever, good luck! You know, now what? You may have stopped a bad thing, but you have not *added* another good thing. And so the type of work that we were doing at South Bronx Churches and in the Industrial Areas Foundation, which is the parent group of South Bronx Churches, is how to organize anger *for*, how do you organize power *for*. People don’t need another experience of *why*? They need some victories, they need some wins, they need some space for public hope.

**Alex Kish:** My associate pastor was talking about his own views of personal ministry and, and he [talked about] God calling on Jeremiah to assist Him, and that God asks him to tear down and to build up. And so I’m wondering if actions can be both/and. To a certain extent we are called to tear down things that are wrong but then also build up things that are right.

**LS:** Yes, it’s just so much easier to tear down. It’s always easier to tear down, and if you don’t start thinking about how you build up in the teaching and the preaching, our social action too often stops at tearing down. I think this perhaps now really is the theological challenge of the age: how to mobilize *for*, and how do you create new things. I’m not about dreaming things right now. With the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, the situation in the Middle East, the sexual scandals in the Roman Catholic Church as examples of where this would be particularly appropriate.

September 11<sup>th</sup> for me crystallized the enormous and evil forces in the world, and I realized that those hundred guys, or however many it was that did that, imagined that action with the intent of destruction. And I wondered if there were a hundred of us, who had enough talent and commitment to good, could we imagine an action that would crystallize as much for faith, love, hope and charity. And when I thought about that all I could think about was the crucifixion as the act which has *done* that. But that gets into the realm of faith because people don't *feel* that. It's sort of a challenge. What was the kind of thinking that organized Sept 11<sup>th</sup>? And what is the kind of thinking that would organize the same equivalent action for good?

The second is with the situation in the Middle East right now; it's violence, violence, violence. How do you take that step back and make something *for*? How do you take something and make it build *for*, that doesn't automatically have within it the destruction of another? It takes a different kind of thinking.

And then in terms of the sexual scandals in the Roman Catholic Church, the same kind of thing. You see the results of unaccountable power being used, and now we can certainly take it apart that people destroy themselves and others, or you can use the experience as something and pick outside it and say, well what does this mean? What can we build for our institution rather than against it?

Another example in modern history that was very poignant to me: I was in Berlin, I think it was a couple of years after the Wall was taken apart, and I was standing with a friend of mine who was a priest there in the Alexanderplatz which is where the big demonstrations were. And all of a sudden I was crying, because all of that great energy that went to the destruction of the Wall, both from the former East and the former West, was aiming to create an opening for a new form of social democracy. But because those people never figured out the answer to the question, "what if we win?" there was nothing in place to catch that social hope except the dominant culture of power and money and government control. And so what happened, public hope was immediately sucked up by Siemens, and Daimler Chrysler, the major corporate and the movement of government of "come on back into the [fold]." And it was because the people had never thought, "what if we win?".

David Dinkins in this city had a problem with that when he ran the second time for mayor. He was not able to form a governing coalition. He could get himself elected, but he couldn't form a governing coalition to deal with what happened when he won. And his second term, he assumed that [he had] both the African American and the Hispanic people, but because he hadn't been doing the work there, because he needed everybody else to govern, he abandoned his base, and they didn't turn out for him a second time.

“What if you win?” A very important question for people to ask.

### *Prayer*

**Lauren Winner:** Earlier you seemed to say that prayer is somewhat ineffective.

**LS:** No, no, no I believe in prayer. The part that keeps you accountable in this world is prayer, I believe. Prayer often calls to action. If you think of prayer as a conversation with God, that conversation that Moses had with the burning bush certainly pulled him into action. Or the prayer that Jesus had before he was crucified pulled him into action. So the prayer creates a new way, a new place you can move into, that you can't even imagine outside of prayer.

**Man:** It also redeems the action. Activism can start to be sort of busywork, busyness, frenzy, and without prayer . . .

**LS:** But I will tell you that activism [that is *for* something] does not feel like busywork. Stuffing envelopes and protesting and stuff like this—this feels like busywork. Typical activism—I don't consider what I do activism. I was really turned off by the student activism. [I] was a high school student near a university where there was an anti-Vietnam war feel. [Attending a protest] I was standing there alongside I don't know how many thousands of people, and I realized that I was not essential there. That nothing I considered 'me' was essential there at all. All they needed was someone who would take up approximately a square foot of space. A lot of activism just requires you take up a square foot of space, sometimes that's all you can do, but for me it wasn't satisfying. You know, I still put my body down if people need a square foot of space, I'll go do that kind of stuff. But [if] it's not something that allows enough opportunity for action and enough opportunity for transformation [then] I can't do it for very long.

### *The Public Private and Family Sectors of Society*

So I want to pull up another way I think about power or anger and power distribution. For better or for worse, my current understanding of society as simply as I can figure it out is based on a three-section model that I've heard attributed to Peter Drucker first, but I've never found the original for it. One is the public sector, one is the private sector, and then what I've heard was that Peter Drucker called this the "third sector", which I thought was a moment of intense lack of imagination on his part. And I have just completed a biography of Theodore Roosevelt, in which he wrote about the home and family sector. So I've decided that was better, for want of something else. And by public sector I mean government, and by private sector I mean the market, and by the home and family sector, I mean us folks.

Now what I would like to discuss and get on the table is some kind of understanding of the following things: the key institutions that we recognize in the public sector, and all that's in the institutions: key leaders, key values and the relative power of these sectors of society.

**Gene McCaharrer:** I'm struck by how increasingly even the values of the private market... One particularly galling phrase I hear a lot is the "working family", as though the family is being turned into a unit of production for the private market.

**LS:** It's racist. It's classist. And sexist.

What about relative power? Where is it? Who is winning right now? Who's gaining power? The market. It's wonderfully good at what it does...but the problem is that it does what it does so well, and is genuinely important, everything flows to that point so that everything is modeled in that way. Every aspect of life. I hate as an ethical context, the term "value", because it's inherently an economic term. It dictates not a good, which has a kind of independence— a value is anything, it makes even morality conform to the world market.

**LS:** In my lifetime (I'm 48), I think the power has shifted from the public arena to the private market. When I was growing up we looked at government to take the lead, and less so now. I think if you look globally, that the evidence for this . . . I really

recommend Thomas L. Friedman's book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. Has anybody read that? I don't like the description but I like the analysis.

### ***Ideas and Fragments***

*With the move into general discussion the audio recording often becomes indecipherable. Below are some fragments from the patchy transcript.*

So the question becomes, "Where do we build power?" And obviously for me, the answer is you have to learn how to build power down here—this is where power is needed.



A key to social justice is that somehow we have to organize power in the family sector to deal with the overwhelming power in the private sector and the still grossly over-powerful public sector. The mediating institutions that used to exist, have been really weakened, the church being one of the big ones, except for many churches that are growing very rapidly—but their theology disconnects them from this.



One of the things I want to talk about that helps people to understand power is that in Spanish, the whole root of it comes from "poder" the Latin word "to be able." In English, "power" is a noun. It's a thing. If I have this thing then you haven't. And so the whole language around power in the United States and English speaking countries is weird this way because we think about it as a thing.



Absolute power does tend to corrupt

What I would like to say is that powerlessness tends to corrupt, and absolute powerlessness corrupts absolutely. And a simple little story from about day twelve when I was in the South Bronx: I hired someone to work for me, and she said that if you went on the payroll, she would have to lose food stamps and benefit, healthcare for the children. And that it would be okay for her to work for me in a way that was basically cheating. A lot of the democratic world puts you in the position of having to cheat, which creates corruption because you are powerless to do anything about it.



There are basically two forms of power. One I would call dominant power, and that would be power *over* another. Another [I] would called relational power, and that's power *with* another. . .



. . . . but even Jesus could not exercise healing power for a person without faith. All power is relational. Every time there's two people, there's a power dynamic. It's either over and against, or it's with. But, Jesus, you know, she touched the hem of his garment, and because of her faith she was healed. But he could not react to people where they did not have any faith. He could not exercise his power, without relational power. Without the relationship, you can't exercise the power.



. . .this always leaves the bottom out. They don't care much about that, unless they can make a lot of money off of you. In the S. Bronx in 1985 unemployment was something like 40%, and 60% of the Bronx payroll was taking care of poor people. So you had this *magnificent* system of maintaining and caring for poverty, and the whole system was set up this way. . .



There are two types of power—people and money. I forgot to say that at the beginning. So you have to organize your people and your money, but make it work for what this group wants. So that's what I do, and that's what I've done, and that's what I want to inspire you to think about and to teach. I still maintain that in the end, if you do that, you provide an opening for social justice. We don't guarantee it, but we provide an opening for it. We move the world a little bit forward, *a little bit forward*, action *for* something, and we've used both love and power to do it. So that's what I wanted to share with you today.