

Rabbi Michael Lerner

**Interviewed by Michael Dowd in the series,
*The Future is Calling Us to Greatness***

Dowd: Well Michael, thank you so much for taking the time to be with me in this conversation series, *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*.

Lerner: Great. Thank you for having me.

Dowd: Well, one of the things that I've been doing at the start of all of these conversations is to invite my guests really get who you are, in terms of your most, the things that you're most committed to, what you're well known for, that sort of thing. This is not a time to be bashful, but help us get who you are and how you got to be where you are.

Lerner: Well, that's a long story.

Dowd: Take your time.

Lerner: Who I am is somebody who is a champion of a world of peace and justice, of love and kindness and generosity, of environmental sanity, and of awe and wonder at the grandeur of the Universe.

Dowd: Love it!

Lerner: That's essentially my essence, that's what I'm about. And I'm the editor of *Tikkun* magazine, which, *Tikkun* is a Hebrew word, it means "to heal, repair, and transform." And there is a prayer that is said every day in our Jewish tradition. It's called "*Elano*" it says, *letakain a lam de mach which adai*. To heal and transform the world under the kingship of, in other words *shaddai* was translated as "the Almighty," but actually, if you look at the word it seems to be a variant of *shad daim*, and *shad daim* means breast, and I think it refers to the notion that, originally, the Hebrews worshipped a breasted god, and what that really means is a nurturing god.

Dowd: Yes.

Lerner: So, when we want to transform the world under the kingship of the nurturing god, we're talking about moving away from a world based on domination and power and control to a world based on love and kindness and generosity. So, I'm a champion of that vision. And *Tikkun* magazine—which I started, along with my

then-wife, Nan Fink, in 1986—has been a voice in the Jewish world originally, and now also interfaith voice, for those values. So we have been in a difficult situation because we're challenging many different assumptions in many different kinds of worlds at the same time. In the Jewish world, we came into existence saying explicitly that we were the liberal alternative, the liberal and progressive alternative, to *Commentary* magazine—which was the Jewish magazine which really articulated the neo-con position, the conservative position in the world, a position that basically is committed to the notion that we're surrounded by evil and we need to protect ourselves, and the only way we can protect ourselves is by having as much military might as possible. And that's both in the United States and in Israel. So we came into existence to put forward a different world view, and became, at first, the voice of liberal and progressive Jews. However, in the course of our evolution the next few years, we suddenly lost a lot of our constituency. And that was because we decided, when the *Intifada* broke out, in 1988, that we had the same responsibility to talk about love, kindness, and generosity towards Palestinians that we had towards everyone else. And so, taking seriously our Jewish tradition meant, in part, taking seriously a command in the Torah that says, "Thou shalt *love* the stranger." Not just *tolerate*...

Dowd: Yes. Yes.

Lerner: ...the stranger. Thou shalt *love* the stranger. So everybody in the Jewish world knows the command, "Love your neighbor as yourself." But very few—certainly I wasn't, and I was very immersed in Judaism growing up, and when I went to the Jewish Theological Seminary for many years—but nobody ever emphasized that particular command, even though, as I started to count it up and research it, I realized that variants of that command occur in the Torah more frequently than any other command in the Torah. Ok? (*Both chuckle.*) That is that one of the most famous variants of it is, "When you come in to your land, don't oppress the stranger.

Dowd: Yes.

Lerner: ...Remember that you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Dowd: Yes, yes.

Lerner: So there I was faced with a dilemma. And the dilemma was to keep the credibility of *Tikkun* magazine by not giving too much focus to what was going on in Israel—playing the role that many, many liberals have chosen in the Jewish world, which is to say they don't want to talk about it, they don't want to hear about Israel, they don't want to pay attention. And they're very good on other social justice issues, so why not celebrate that?

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: Go that path and I would have retained *Tikkun's* role and *Tikkun's* funding. But, unfortunately for our magazine, but fortunately for my soul...

Dowd: Mmmmm...

Lerner: ...I had to choose the path of addressing what seemed to me to be the most fundamental contradiction in the Jewish world, namely: the contradiction between our liberal and loving and justice-seeking Torah, and our history as the group that had championed civil rights and human rights for other peoples, and to abandon that when it came to the most central issue in our current reality, which is the way a state—that calls itself *the* Jewish state and gets alliance from the vast majority of Jews around the world—is acting in ways that is oppressive and hurtful.

Dowd: Yeah, yeah.

Lerner: So, I think it was that choice that has, on the one hand, somewhat dramatically decreased our financial support, dramatically decreased my ability to operate in the Jewish world, and yet, at the same time, has been the one choice that I think has made us act with the kind of integrity that I hope future generations will look back at and say, “Yeah, there was this kind of a voice, starting in 1988, that was consistently articulating a pro-Israel and pro-Palestine view.”

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: And because, of course, the commands are precisely not just for Jews. They're about all people on the planet.

Dowd: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Lerner: And, of course, the Torah starts talking not just at the beginning of Jewish history, but at the beginning of human history by insisting—by telling in the very first chapter—God creates human beings in God's image.

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: So, whatever his/her/its image is, it's an image that's equally found in Jews as in everyone else on the planet.

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: And, this position, although people in the Jewish world might abstractly agree with it, hate it when it's applied to the Palestinian people.

Dowd: Yeah, yeah.

Lerner: And I have no choice but to do that, to apply it to all people.

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: So that's one element of who I am in the world, and what *Tikkun* magazine became.

Dowd: Well, actually, before you go on to talk about anything else, I'm really glad that you gave some of that background, because I've been saying now, for quite a few months, that my experience of these conversations in this series, *The Future is Calling us to Greatness*, is that it represents a veritable who's-who of prophetic inspiration. And you come at the top of the list in terms of what you have done professionally, what you have done personally, in terms of taking a prophetic stance even when it's not popular, or when it's not financially to your advantage within your own in-group. And yet, as you say, your soul, there's a place where you knew that there was an integrity that you were aligned with even though it wasn't popular and worked against you financially. So thank you for giving that background.

Lerner: Thanks. Yes, it certainly worked against us financially. So *Tikkun* at the moment is just teetering on the edge. I had to lay myself off, although I'm still the editor, I had to lay myself off with regard to finances, to not have a salary and just live on Social Security right now, which is not so easy in this country at this point. But, anyway, in order to keep the magazine alive I had to make a choice, and I decided, well, lay myself off and stop taking money and just live in a much more precarious position. You know, when you said the word prophet... a lot of people call me that. Or they say, you know, my colleague Cornell West—with whom I wrote a book called, *Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin*—wrote of my book, *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back our Country from the Religious Right*, "Michael Lerner's the great voice of contemporary public intellectuals." I never claim such a position.

Dowd: Right.

Lerner: But I've studied, I've been immersed in the prophets since I was a kid. I studied every week, starting from the time I was 12. I would spend, um, every *Shabbat*—every Sabbath, every Saturday afternoon—studying a) Abraham Joshua Heschel's books, and b) the prophet Jeremiah and the prophet Isaiah.

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: Drove my parents crazy. *(Both laugh.)* But I was immersed in those prophets, and when I went to study with Heschel at Jewish Theological Seminary, he was working on his book *The Prophets* at the time, and I had a very special connection with him and became one of his protégés, and I felt very much aligned with the vision of the prophets. But one of the things that was obvious, that my parents were continually trying to tell me, warn me about, is that it's not a good way to make a living. *(Both laugh.)*

Dowd: Yes, I'm sure. Well the way that I've been speaking about it now, for the last couple of years, is that there's a trivial way of understanding prophets and there's an undeniably real way, it seems to me. The trivial way is imagining that prophets were all in the distant past and they were channeling some other-worldly entity or predicting the future. Whereas I see prophets are those who read reality, who have divine eyes, sacred eyes, and who can see what reality is doing, what reality is up to, and then give voice to what's real in ways that call all of us to deeper integrity, and to come back into alignment with reality. And, in that sense, I think there are many prophets—many of the people involved in this series I see as playing a prophetic role: they're seeing what's real, they're sensing what's emerging, and then speaking a word of warning to the people that says, basically, we need to get right with reality or else! You know?

Lerner: Right. I have to say that I believe that that capacity is a privilege that I was born into, a certain kind of privilege in my life. My family wasn't rich, but they were very much involved in Democratic Party politics. And I got to see, from an early point in my life, the insides of what was happening in the Democratic Party, and came to understand how deeply corrupt it was, how much it was subservient to the interests of the rich and the powerful, how, uh, what a huge disconnect there was between what they were saying and what they were doing. As a teenager, my mother was the administrative aid in charge of politics for United States Senator Harrison Williams. And so, in that position, Williams sent me a daily copy of the congressional record, and he used to call me up when I was a teenager because I was the only person he knew who actually read the congressional record.

Dowd: *(Big laugh!)*

Lerner: And so I watched him, and then many others, move from being a very principled young man to being more and more and more accommodating to the powers. And so, again, that was amazing privilege. Then, secondly, to have encountered, when I was 12, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and to have learned from him. Then to have come to Berkeley in 1964 to do graduate work, and get my Ph.D. in Philosophy,

and, at that time, become in the free speech movement, first, and then I became president of the Berkeley chapter of the Students for Democratic Society, and eventually ended up at the University of Washington, in Seattle, as a professor of Philosophy, where I was indicted by the federal government as one of what was called the, one of the big major federal trials against the anti-war movement—called “the Seattle Seven”—and J. Edgar Hoover said, “Michael Lerner...” trying to warn the federal appeals court not to let me out of jail for even a moment, said, “...he’s one of the most dangerous criminals in America.”

Dowd: (Chuckling.)

Lerner: So, I came back from all of this, and of course it did ruin my career in philosophy, and people wouldn’t hire me thereafter.

Dowd: Wow.

Lerner: But I look back on this as incredible privilege.

Dowd: Yes! Exactly.

Lerner: Because I got to see so much of the inner workings of reality. And I learned a critical message, which really has been a subsequent main message of my life, which is: don’t be realistic; don’t accept—because being realistic really means accepting the contours of “what is”...

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: ...as the definition for *what can be*, and then working within that “what is,”...

Dowd: Yeah, yeah.

Lerner: ...but the central message of the Jewish tradition—which I only came to understand after going through these struggles—was that *who* the God or Goddess of the Universe *is* is the force of transformation that makes possible the transformation from that which *is* to that which *ought to be*.

Dowd: Yes.

Lerner: So on my reading of Judaism—and I wrote this out in a book that became a national best seller, called *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation*—that my view is that God is that about the Universe that makes *possible* the transformation from that which *is* to that which *ought to be*.

Dowd: Mmmm.

Lerner: Whatever it is about reality that makes that possible—that’s what I mean by God.

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: And consequently, um, idolatry is being realistic. Idolatry is accepting the contours of power, the contours of what is, and saying, “I must work within that.”

Dowd: Mmmm.

Lerner: And, of course that doesn’t mean jump out of a window and pretend you can fly. But it does mean that the social and economic order is not like, um, laws of physics.

Dowd: Yes.

Lerner: It’s not fixed. It is potentially, fundamentally transformable, and we create it in God’s image as the partners with God—so I came to understand that we are *partners* with God in the healing and transformation of the world, and that’s what it means to be created in the image of God. It means to be partners with God in healing and repairing the world.

Dowd: Yeah. I love it. I love it. And one of the things that I love so much about that is that it embodies this prophetic stance of, you know, almost seeing God as incarnate or a personification of possibility, of transformation, of healing, of wholeness. And that idolatry is simply taking what is that has been given by previous economic or governmental or political powers and only operating within that. I love it. I love it.

Lerner: Yes. Thank you.

Dowd: Well Michael, say a little about the Network of Spiritual Progressives.

Lerner: Ok. So the other main thing that *Tikkun* has been addressing, um, is the spiritual crisis in American society. So this came out of work that I did. I got a second Ph.D., after my Ph.D. in Philosophy, because the Ph.D. in Philosophy was a dead-end for me because I was a professor of Philosophy when I was indicted, and then the University of Washington, uh the state of Washington, passed a law, called, “the Lerner rule”...

Dowd (*Chuckling.*)

Lerner ...to prohibit the University from ever hiring anyone who *might* engage in political activity—later declared unconstitutional, by the way—and then, um, of course they

fired me or they refused to renew my contract there. So, um, place after place that I would go to apply for a job in Philosophy, I found that *departments* of Philosophy wanted to hire me but the administration had been approached by the FBI and told, “Don’t hire this guy.” So, anyway, so I got a second Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, and then did a study of the psychodynamics of American society. And, um, in that study, I focussed a lot on trying to understand why people were moving to the right politically when their economic interests were with the Democratic Party, or the Left.

Dowd: Yeah, yeah. Mm-hmm.

Lerner: And this continues to this very moment. And what we discovered, myself and my team of researchers—because I was the principle investigator of and NIMH investigation of psychodynamics in American society—was that there was a deep spiritual crisis in people’s lives. And that it was rooted in the ethos of the marketplace—the materialism, the selfishness, the looking out for number one, that people were learning day in and day out in the world of work, because there they found that they were being rewarded for only looking out for maximizing the bottom line of the corporations that they were working in, and not trusting anybody else, certainly not trusting other parts of the corporation, never knowing when somebody might shut down the whole corporation or move it to another country, whatever, for the sake of maximizing their money. So, people came, more and more, over the course of the years, to believe that the only rational way to be in this society—given that everybody’s a rational maximizer of self-interest—is for *them* to be a rational maximizer of self-interest. And more and more people are bringing this home into their personal life, looking at other people primarily in terms of, “What can you do for me? How can you help *my* interest?” And this extended even to families and loving relationships: increasingly people entering into marriages on the basis of the calculation of, well, “amongst the people who are likely to fall for me in the short run...”

Dowd: (*Chuckling.*)

Lerner: ...*you* will satisfy more of my needs and take care of more of what *I* need than anyone else, so that’s what I mean by commitment to you; I’m committed to you because of that.” Well, the consequence of that as it spreads out through the society is that families feel very insecure, even loving relationships and families. Why? Because more and more people come to realize that their partner might at some point or other leave them for somebody else who might satisfy more—or at least they *believe*—would satisfy more of their needs. So, if it’s all about maximizing your own needs, and you expect that that’s what rationality is in this society—that’s what it is to be a rational person, to be a rational maximizer of one’s own self-interest—then if you respect your partner you realize that they must also be

rational in that same way, and so you're never sure that your partner isn't going to, at some point or other, be able to find somebody who they think would maximize their own well-being better than you can. That creates tremendous insecurity—not just in the 50% of relationships that end in divorce, but also in the other 50% of relationships, because nobody knows which of those two categories they're in at any given time.

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: So, the marketplace—and the values of the marketplace—generate this tremendous insecurity in people, and loneliness, a sense of not knowing who they can trust in the world, who they can fully rely upon. And this creates a tremendous psychological strain—sometimes manifesting as depression, sometimes manifesting in alcoholism or drug abuse, or in sexual acting out, or in phrenetic activities of one sort or another, um, even sometimes political activities are phrenetic—but tremendous pain in people's lives.

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: So, I was experiencing that, learning about that, from literally thousands of people that my research team were able to connect with. And realized that, hey, this helps explain why so many people are moving to the right politically. Because what people were telling us in these interviews was, “Yeah, I know that economically I'd be better off with the Democrats, but, um the Democrats talk as though it's all about economic entitlements and political rights—they rarely talk about love, kindness, generosity. I don't hear that language. I hear that from the right, and I hear it particularly in my right-wing churches. Even in progressive churches, I go there and I hear them talking about the most depressed, and I agree with them on those issues, but,” they told us they never felt that they were “personally being cared for...”

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: ...whereas in right-wing churches they felt like they were personally being cared for. I had this experience myself when I was single and going to, occasionally going to orthodox synagogues—I'd go to liberal synagogues, reform and conservative and reconstructionist and Jewish renewal—where people would tell you, you'd hear great sermons and then you'd go home and nobody paid much attention to you. Uh, I went to the orthodox synagogue, and in the orthodox synagogue I'd hear ferocious, horrendous sermons—things I couldn't stand—and...

Dowd: *(Chuckling.)*

Lerner: ...people would come up to you and say, “Hey, do you have a place to eat for lunch? Do you have anybody in your family who’s sick that we could visit or take? Would you like to meet a member of the opposite sex? Are you single?” or whatever. There was this level of caring for...

Dowd: Yes, yes.

Lerner: ...that just didn’t exist in the liberal world that was articulating all these great ideals. And, similarly, in social movements—ah, go to political rallies or political meetings and nobody ever paid attention to what I might need personally.

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: So, I was hearing this, we were hearing this, from thousands of people. And so we attempted to go, and so we said there’s a crisis in this society, it’s a crisis of meaning.

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: People are hungry for love, they’re hungry for kindness, and they’re hungry for some framework of meaning and purpose that *isn’t* only about making more money—it transcends the values of the capitalist marketplace. But when they listened to the Democrats, the Democrats were saying, “No, it’s the economy, stupid.” And so then, if it’s the economy, then how come these people aren’t voting for you? Well, here’s the answer that the left and the liberals give: the reason they’re not voting for us is because they’re racist, sexist, homophobic, or stupid.

Dowd: (*Chuckles.*) Well, you know what’s fascinating about what you’re saying is that you were coming to these understandings and this insight long before Jonathan Haidt wrote about this in his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis* and then *The Righteous Mind*—that we have different moral categories. And conservatives speak to the breadth of human moral consideration, and also appeal strongly to our innate sense of community and the importance of community; whereas liberals speak to a much narrower band.

Lerner: Exactly. I went first, I met with the leadership of the labor movement, I met with the leadership of the Democratic senators, I met with the leadership of the peace movement and the civil rights movement—nobody could understand what I was saying.

Dowd: (*Chuckle.*)

Lerner: They all thought...and I realized that when I talked about these kinds of needs they were responding saying, "Well we're not religious."

Dowd: Right.

Lerner: And, um, there's a deep religio-phobia in the Left...

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: ...and in the liberal world, that, um, manifests in the following way. When the liberals or progressives organize a demonstration or run a campaign, they want religious people to vote for them or they want religious people to be there. They say, "Come on along! We welcome you with open arms." However, once people get into the culture and start to experience the culture in the liberal or progressive world—particularly liberal intellectuals—what they experience is the following. The message that's being given, covertly or overtly, is, "We need you to help our project, but we also think that you're in a lower level..."

Dowd: *(Chuckle.)*

Lerner: ...of consciousness, a lower level of psychological development, for believing that you have some spiritual need here." When it takes the form of God, then we think, "Well, you probably have a father problem..."

Dowd: *(Chuckle.)*

Lerner: ...you know, you have some issue with your father, you need a strong father, you're scared in the world, you need somebody to protect you." Um, or, if you're into a non-God-oriented spirituality, uh, "You're still at a lower level of development. We hope that, by getting part of our..."

Dowd: *(Laughing.)*

Lerner: ...culture, you will slowly rise to the level of consciousness that we are at. But, in the meantime, we can use you for our..."

Dowd: *(Big laughing.)*

Lerner: ...fodder, for our troops, or for whatever, you know, for our struggles, for your votes, and so forth."

Dowd: *(Laughing.)*

Lerner: But see, most people—and this is one of the things that the liberal and progressives, the Democratic party, the Greens don't understand—is that most people may not be the most brilliant when it comes to figuring out policy issues, but they know when they're being disrespected.

Dowd: Exactly.

Lerner: They can feel that.

Dowd: Exactly.

Lerner: And so that's what made the right particularly brilliant in being able to say, "These people in the liberal and progressive world are elitist."

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: Now, for the people in the liberal and progressive world, they heard that and said, "That's crazy! The real elites are the 1% that has *vastly* disproportionate wealth and power." And I agree with that—that is the real elites. But, what they were missing was the...

Dowd: Yes.

Lerner: ...psychological meaning of saying that you're elitist, because, in fact, those movements were elitist in the sense that they disrespect most ordinary Americans.

Dowd: Right.

Lerner: They don't understand, they think that the only possible reason that other people are not with us is because they're racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, or stupid.

Dowd: (*Chuckle.*)

Lerner: And that's not true! What's true is that there are other sets of needs...

Dowd: Yes.

Lerner: ...that people have that are not reducible to material needs, and not reducible to political rights.

Dowd: Preach it, brother! Preach it. (*Laughs.*)

Lerner: There's this other set of needs...

Dowd: Yes.

Lerner: ...we call, "meaning needs" or "spiritual needs." And, eventually, *Tikkun* decided to create an organization called The Network of Spiritual Progressives to try to articulate these needs and to fight for them. And the central core of The Network of Spiritual Progressives—so we created this The Network of Spiritual Progressives—and it is not a Jewish organization, it's interfaith and also atheist-welcoming, secular humanist-welcoming. It's not a religious organization; it doesn't suppose that you believe in God or in crystals, or in any particular new-age tomfoolery. It's spiritual, in the sense that it refuses to accept the narrowed vision of epistemology that predominates in the culture that says that that which is real is that which can be verified through sense datum or measured.

Dowd: Right.

Lerner: What we're saying is everything else, that can't be measured or can't be verified through sense datum, is what we mean by spiritual. So that means everything from ethics, aesthetics, uh, music, love, um....

Dowd: Yeah, the entire realm of values, of meaning, of inspiration. One of the, you probably don't know this about my history, but back in 1987 I became Ron Sider's assistant at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary. And so, that was my first exposure to, sort of, radical evangelicalism within the Christian world—and of course Jim Wallace, and Tony Campolo, and so many people who were speaking from a what I would call prophetic stance, progressive politics, moderate to sometimes even conservative theology. But the theology was in service of what I call "right relationship to reality," and a broader band of moral intake than the kind of narrow band than the liberals so often have cornered themselves in.

Lerner: Exactly. And I love all of those people you mentioned. And all of them, in one way or another, have been connected to *Tikkun* or the Network of Spiritual Progressives.

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: But, uh, so we created this network, and it includes people from evangelical Christians who have that kind of consciousness to, all the way to, the most radical anti-God, anti- (*inaudible*), you know, you could count on.

Dowd: Well, as well as people like Joan Chittister, and Cornell West, and other luminaries who are coming from a solid grounding in a particular tradition, but doing so with,

again, use that word, prophetic voice, saying that what has been in the past is not enough—we need to stay attuned to what God, what reality, is revealing, and not just, as you say, not just the reality that can be measured, but, you know, what reality is revealing, so that we can all move forward in some kind of a healthy way, and to repair, or to restore, or to transform, or to heal our relationship to the future, and our relationship to each other, and our relationship to the air, water, soil, and life upon which we all depend.

Lerner: Exactly. So, we said, “Ok. What’s our core belief?” Our core belief is that the society needs a new bottom line. The old bottom line said that every institution, every government practice, every corporation should be judged efficient, rational and productive to the extent that it maximizes money and power. And we say, “No. They should be judged efficient, rational, and productive also to the extent that they maximize love and caring, kindness and generosity, ethical and environmental behavior and sensitivity,...

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: ...enhance our capacity to respond to other human beings as embodiments of the sacred, ...

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: ...and enhance our capacity to respond to the Universe with awe, wonder, and radical amazement at the grandeur and mystery of all that is.”

Dowd: Amen!

Lerner: So, that’s our new bottom line.

Dowd: Yeah. I love it.

Lerner: And our goal is to try to get people in every workplace and in every profession to re-envision what that profession would look like, what that workplace would look like if *this* were the bottom line.

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: And then, as a next step, to then join with others in different workplaces and in different professions, together, build a movement to try to change the world so that it can *be* that way.

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: Step number one is getting people to the point of being able to envision—allowing themselves to envision this. And we have only one rule when we tell groups to, you know, let's—we speak to the lawyers or the doctors or, uh, whatever profession they're in or whatever workplace—one rule: Don't allow the reality police in.

Dowd: (*Chuckle.*)

Lerner: The reality police are all the voices in your head that are telling you that there's some “they” that won't let us do this.

Dowd: Mmmm.

Lerner: There's some “they” that is telling you, “It's impossible. You're being foolish. Nothing can happen differently than what's happening right now. So stick with what is.”

Dowd: Mmmm.

Lerner: And we're saying, “Ok. Here's the one rule for building a spiritual progressive consciousness, to build a new bottom line: You have to stop letting that voice predominate in your mind.” And, instead, allow yourself to think, “What would this workplace—what would it be like to be a lawyer, or a doctor, or an engineer, or a scientist, or an academic, or a government official, or whatever—if there was no ‘they’ telling them to be realistic, and, instead, they were being asked, ‘How can you rebuild this institution, or this social practice, or this professional way of being in which you're going to be judged by how much love and generosity you're generating,...

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: ...how much environmental sanity you're generating,...

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: ...how much caring, how much you are enhancing people's capacity to respond to other human beings in a loving and caring way, or to the Universe with awe and wonder?” So *that* is what, that's the fundamental of what The Network of Spiritual Progressives is all about, and, um, what we're trying to achieve. The second, now then people will ask, “Well does that amount to concretely though? Do you have any ideas about that?” And yeah, I wrote a book called, *Spirit*

Matters, that tries to lay that out. And then actually a national best seller called, *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right*, in which I spell it out more. And on our website, www.spiritualprogressives.org, we have a thing that we call, *The Spiritual Covenant with America*. Right now it's listed under "Yearning for a World of Love." And then we lay out, under that, the spiritual covenant of what it could look like.

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: But we have two very concrete projects that we are involved in that are manifestations of this. One is called, "The Environmental and Social Amendment to the Constitution"—ESRA—and the ESRA calls for the following. And I have a funny feeling that, even if people watch this well into the future, that the ESRA will still be relevant—unfortunately. *(Laughs.)* Anyway, the Environmental and Social Amendment to the Constitution says the following. Number one, it bans all money from elections except public funding.

Dowd: Yes, yes, yes.

Lerner: Not just corporate money, but also the money of individuals, so that nobody can get a heads up, a special...

Dowd: An unfair advantage.

Lerner: Yeah. An advantage by virtue of their money. Um, so it bans all money, makes it illegal to give, either directly or indirectly,...

Dowd: Yup.

Lerner: ...to political candidates or to political parties, and says, no, it's got to come from a fair and equal distribution to all the candidates, and so forth.

Dowd: Love it.

Lerner: *(Inaudible)* more in that. The second part says every corporation with incomes above \$50 million—so we're not talking about small corporations, we're talking about the big corporations—every corporation with an income above \$50 million must get a new corporate charter once every five years.

Dowd: Wow.

Lerner: And that new corporate charter will only be granted to those corporations that can prove a satisfactory history of environmental and social responsibility to a jury of

ordinary citizens. Why a jury of ordinary citizens? Because we see right now, just the day that we're talking is the day after Obama, the supposedly liberal Democrat, is appointing to, uh, one of the Security and Exchange Commission somebody whose whole history was in Goldman Sachs promoting the interests of the super-rich. So what happens is that the institutions of government that are set up to monitor the special interests are filled with representatives of the special interests.

Dowd: Right. Exactly.

Lerner: So, you can't trust that. You have to depend on ordinary citizens. And, so, we're saying that this determination—and in the ESRA we list a whole bunch of specific things that they're to address, to look at, in their corporate behavior, in order to judge whether they are socially and environmentally responsible. So this is a second part, is, if they can't do that, then the jury has the ability to suspend them or put them on probation for a few years to make changes; and, ultimately, to take away their corporate license and give it to another group of people who can show that they would run that corporation in an environmentally and socially more responsible way. So that's number two. And number three is a requirement for education about the environment at every level from kindergarten through graduate and professional schools, and, including not only about what's going on and how to protect yourself from the destruction of the environment that's happening, but also tools to help you organize to change what's happening.

Dowd: Yes, yes, yes.

Lerner: So, that's the third part. And the fourth part has to do with, um, with restricting the ability of corporations to move their assets out of this country or out of whatever community they're in—which is what they've been doing whenever anybody threatens them...

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: ...with, let's say requiring a living wage for people, or requiring environmental responsibility, they say, "Ok. We'll just move." And many of them have been able to do that. And so this part also prohibits them from doing that. So, that's the ESRA.

Dowd: Well, hang on just a second, before you do this I just want to pause, and say that, from this conversation on, you can count on me to evangelize this ESRA. This is kick ass! Continue.

Lerner: Ok. You can find it on our website, at www.tikkun.org/ESRA, or, just got to, that's on the *Tikkun* website, you can just go www.tikkun.org/ESRA, or you can go to

www.spiritualprogressives.org and it's there. The second major program that we're advancing is the Global Marshall Plan (*inaudible*), and it's actually a domestic and global Marshall Plan, because it's meant to eliminate poverty all over the world, including in the advanced industrial countries. And this plan calls for, number one, dedicating between 2-3% of the Gross Domestic Product of all the advanced industrial countries to end global poverty, homelessness, hunger, inadequate education, inadequate health care, and to provide funds for repairing the environment. This is not ameliorating. Ok. This is not saying we want to ameliorate poverty. We're saying, "End it!" And it can be ended with that amount of money and with a smart way of doing it. Now the rest of the ESRA explains how you can do it. And how you can do it means giving money not to the governments of those countries, but setting up bodies of people in each country that represent—really represent—the people in those countries and their needs, and not doing what past give-aways have done from the United States or the other advanced industrial countries, which has, essentially, been giving money to elites in those countries that never got really paid attention to ending poverty in their own country. But also, it changes the conditions of trade of the United States, because right now the advanced industrial countries have been able to impose on the developing countries sets of trade arrangements that have worked for the interests of the wealthy and the advanced industrial countries but have not worked in the interests of the poor people and the hungry people of the world.

Dowd: Well, I love seeing love, so this is great. Well, Michael, beginning to wind down, how does this progressive spiritual world view that you've been articulating so powerfully in a variety of ways, how does this inspire you, personally, in the face of climate change and some other really large-scale global challenges?

Lerner: Well, yeah.... We are deeply committed, and *I* am deeply committed, to doing everything I can to save the environment. But, of course, it can't be done by one person or even one country; it has to be done by a global movement. But the recognition that the things that always have seemed unrealistic or impossible have happened over and over again, and have happened in my own lifetime, so that I've seen it—I've seen people who said, "We'll never overcome apartheid in South Africa."

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: "We'll never get African-Americans to have equal rights in this country and end segregation." Um, certainly, when the women's movement came into existence, so many women saying to other women, "Forget it! I mean, don't talk about patriarchy. Maybe go for some small little change here. But, you know, get a little bit more money for your work, but don't talk about patriarchy because you can't possibly challenge that—we're had 10,000 years of patriarchy." And I've seen so

many changes in that sphere happening over the course of the past 40 years—unbelievable changes—all not just in the United States or the advanced industrial countries, but all over the world.

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: So, um, and now, most recently, gays and lesbians asking for the right to marry, and it seeming totally unrealistic and crazy to, you know, at first. And then it happens. So, I've learned that you should never, um, never accept reality. I'd say, instead, never accept people who are saying x or y or z, in terms of social change, is impossible.

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: Because you never know what is *possible* until you *struggle* for what is *desirable*.

Dowd: Yeah. Amen.

Lerner: You never know what is *possible* until you *struggle* for what is *desirable*. Because things that looked impossible start to look differently when enough people get engaged in that.

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: So, that's given me a lot of hope, even about the environment. Um, the same time I'm full well-aware of the deep depression that people are feeling as the Earth itself seems to be crying to us. The Earth, as the Earth's life force is more and more challenged by the ethos of materialism and selfishness that is a global ethos, more and more I feel people laden down with depression, and that depression makes it hard for people to come together and move forward.

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: So I do what I can to make that possible. Thank God I also happen to have a Jewish tradition that gives me a little bit of taste of the world I want, because once every week, from Friday night to Saturday night, I stop everything—I disconnect all of my computers, and my cell phones, and everything else; don't answer the telephones, and don't watch television or radio, or whatever—and go into the celebration of the Universe that is called Sabbath, or *Shabbat* in Hebrew. And that is incredibly nurturing to my soul. And I believe that everybody should go for, should have a *Shabbat*, a Sabbath. In fact, one of the things in *Tikkun* that I've written about in a forthcoming issue—probably not forthcoming by the time people see this—is a plan for reinstating the sabbatical year.

Dowd: Yes.

Lerner: So that once every seven years the whole world could stop working, or at least the whole country, and then each country may be doing different years for that. But having everybody in a country stop working; and celebrating the Universe,

Dowd: Mm-hmm.

Lerner: ...and relaxing, and figuring out what kind of world they want, and using the surplus that's been accumulated in the other six years to live off of in the seventh year. Um, it's possible. It could happen.

Dowd: Yeah.

Lerner: I'm not holding my breath.

Dowd: (*Chuckles.*)

Lerner: But I know that this is, this approach, this spiritual nurturance is what keeps me going. (*inaudible*) Shabbat. And I think it could be amazing if more and more people were able to allow themselves to do it, even though, without having to worry about, "Well, do I believe I'm commanded by God to do it?"

Dowd: Right. Of course.

Lerner: This is self-justifying. This experience, those 25 hours from just before sunset on a Friday night to a little bit after sunset on Saturday night, these 25 hours are so refreshing to the soul that I know of almost nobody who has gotten in to it understanding what it's about who has not been refreshed by it and really enjoyed it. But you have to do it in the strict way, in the most religious restrict way, namely cut off your telephone, cut off your watching, keeping up with things on your computer or your cell phone or whatever.

Dowd: And, and commune with possibility incarnate.

Lerner: Exactly. Which is the other part, is, once you've cut off from all the rest then to allow yourself to connect to the spiritual reality of the Universe. And there are many ways to do that. And I, for one, of course I'm a rabbi and I have a synagogue, in Berkeley and San Francisco, and I'm deeply into my tradition. But people come to me sometimes, Jews come to me and say, "You know, I've found more in Buddhism than in Judaism." Or, "More in Hinduism." And I say to them, "Fine." I say, "Why should we remain Jewish?" I say, "You don't have to remain

Jewish. I don't need you to be Jewish. I just need you to follow whatever spiritual path is *really* nurturing to your soul.”

Dowd: Yes, exactly.

Lerner: And whatever it is, and it doesn't have to with a god, or without a god, you know. Whatever path actually works for you is fine with me, um, as long as it leads you to affirm the humanity of everyone else, and to struggle for peace and social justice, and kindness and generosity in the world, whatever path is great. The paths that *don't* lead you in that direction are not so great, as far as I'm concerned. The ones that just lead you to satisfying yourself, and nurturing your own self without regard to others—that's not the greatest spiritual path as far as I'm concerned. But any spiritual path that leads you to connect both with your own self and your own inner life, and, simultaneously, to the necessary healing of the world and the reducing of pain in this world, and the caring about everyone else on the planet and the caring for the planet—that's a good spiritual path, and it doesn't have to be my path.

Dowd: Amen. Amen. Wow! Michael, this has been fabulous. There's one last question that Connie, my wife, has asked me to ask everybody, and it's really fun; and that is, if you had the opportunity to have dinner with any three people in human history, or a one-on-one, like over a glass of wine or, you know, a cup of coffee or whatever, with any three people in history, who would those three people be? And why would you choose them?

Lerner: Well, for me it would be Moses, Isaiah, and Marx. *(Both laughing.)* Moses because he was the great law-giver, and because he had so much *(inaudible)*, so much trouble being a leader, constantly being attacked by everybody and denounced by everybody, and having a problem dealing with it. I'd like to be able to talk to him about how he managed from ages 80 to 120 to keep up his leadership role and not just despair of it totally. For Isaiah, who was really denounced by everyone, I would love to know more about how he, what sustained him when he could get up in front of the temple and say, “God hates your sacrifices. God didn't ask you for this.” On *Yom Kippur* he went in front of the temple, as people are going in to the temple, the big temple in Jerusalem, and he said, “God hates this.” Quoting God: “I detest your sacrifices. Who asked you to come and defile my sanctuary? Isn't this the fast day I wanted to feed the poor and to take care of the widow and the powerless, and to end the oppression of all people? That's the fast that I asked for!” I want to know how he,...

Dowd: Yeah, yeah.

Lerner: ...what helped make it possible for him. And for Marx, I'd like to share with him a

little bit of what might have happened differently had he gotten that his roots were actually spiritual and ethical roots.

Dowd: Mmmm.

Lerner: And to talk about the limits of the scientism that led him to think, that there was a, um, that his approach was scientific rather than ethical. Because, actually, I believe his roots were deeply ethical, but he thought that he would have more of an impact by trying to dress it up as a science. I'd love to have that conversation with him; I'd love to have an evening with him.

Dowd: That's great. That's great.

Lerner: I'd hope I could give all three of them a good vegetarian meal.

Dowd: *(Big laugh.)* That's great. Well, Michael, where would you recommend, for people who want to go more deeply into these ideas that you've been talking about in your own work. Give us some resources—what are the best websites or places to go?

Lerner: Well the first is: www.tikkun.org. We have lots of articles there, but the magazine itself, the print version, you have to subscribe to. The rest, you can only get little snippets of it on the website. But you can subscribe at www.tikkun.org. The other main place is www.spiritualprogressives.org. That's our website for our organization. And both of them are filled with very interesting materials to read. Of course I'd love it if people would also read my most recent book, *Embracing Israel Palestine*, which tries to talk about what a compassionate path would be towards resolving those conflicts, that recognizes the humanity of both sides and recognizes how screwed up both sides are. Because everybody that I meet is always the champion for one side or the other.

Dowd: Right.

Lerner: One side is the righteous victim, the other side is the evil other.

Dowd: Exactly.

Lerner: But the truth is, both sides are righteous and both sides are screwed up and doing evil things. Anyway, I'd like to have people read that book, which they can get, either on Kindle, through Amazon, or directly through us, at www.tikkun.org/EIP, standing for embracing Israel Palestine. Or, um, any of my other books: *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back our Country from the Religious Right*, still, unfortunately, too relevant. And then there are, of course, many others. People sometimes say, "*Tikkun*, that's Michael Lerner's venture." No. you know, 90% of

what's in *Tikkun* are other people. And I've spent my life trying to provide a space for other people, to have their ideas also articulated. And *Tikkun* often welcomes people who challenge our ideas, because that's, in my view, that's my philosophy part, you know the philosophy Ph.D. is, I know that people get most out of engaging in the free contest between different ideas. And I continue to grow and learn from that. I'm 71 going on 72 soon. I keep, I'm wide open to learning more, and changing my views as I learn from so many other people.

Dowd: Right. Well, Michael, you've been an older brother on the path, an older brother on the spiritual path for me for a long time, and it's just been such a delight to have this conversation and to see you so vibrant. And I hope that your health continues, and that your new love flourishes. And just, blessings on you and your work.

Lerner: And to you, too, Michael. I've very much appreciated your work, and I'm so glad you're doing this series.

Dowd: Thanks. Bye bye.

Lerner: Bye bye.