This World of Dreams—and Yet

In Appreciation of the Lifetime Achievement Award

Richard Quinney

I have thought about and contemplated the nature of reality for as long as I can remember—beginning on the farm, walking the land, working in the fields, tending the farm animals, and listening to the soft words of my family as the darkness folded us into the night and we dreamed ourselves into another day. This beginning has lasted throughout a lifetime, even, particularly, as I became a sociologist, pursuing a teaching career, and researching and writing on crime, law, and this social world of ours. Early on, I imagined the world as one that is constructed out of the many possible ways of being human. Sociology has always been to me of great, and grave, philosophical import. Our calling is both scientific, trying to figure out what is happening, and moral, trying to do the right thing.

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Along the way, the spiritual dimension of being human has informed and grounded my work. Whether the concern has been an academic understanding or an investigation personal and aesthetic, Eastern philosophy has offered helpful insights. The Diamond Sutra of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition begins with the phrase “Thus I have heard.” The Buddha had been walking with the monks at the end of day and sat down to rest. An elder monk named Subhuti asked the Buddha a question. What follows is a dialogue regarding perception of
reality. The teaching is about the unlearning of preconceived reality. At the end of the Diamond Sutra is the famous four-line verse:

Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting:
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.

In the sutra we are told that what is true never vanishes. What does vanish when we are mindfully aware is delusion. The Diamond Sutra proclaims that creations of the mind are like dreams, phantoms, and bubbles. Can the mind ever break out of its dream state? Let’s say, at least, that being mindfully aware alters our dreams. Whether the alterations bring us closer to what is true is ultimately a question beyond our human ability to know.

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If our lives are the stuff of dreams, if the mind even in awareness can never know the truth, the truth of our daily existence, then what are we to do? Maybe the same as we would do if we knew the truth, could know the truth: we would live carefully and with great compassion. Living without certainty of the truth makes our living more precious and meaningful. Each moment is a moment filled with the meaning that we give to our actions and to our thoughts—the meaning that we create in our daily relations with others, near and far.

Kobayashi Issa, author of the haibun spiritual journal *The Spring of My Life*, wrote this poem two hundred years ago:
This world of dew
Is only the world of dew—
And yet . . . and yet . . .

Yes, and yet. How to live with life as a dream? These lines could well serve as the theme for our lives, academic and otherwise. One goes on living carefully and with wonder and thankfulness.

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Thus, everything that we do as sociologists and students of social problems—what we think, what we do, and how we conduct ourselves—is grounded in a moral philosophy. Our intellectual work is the advancement of one moral philosophy or another. And each moral philosophy generates its own way of bearing witness to the world that we humans have constructed.

Being witnesses, we are already engaging in social action. I note here my appreciation of the Lifetime Achievement Award given to me by the Law and Society Division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, the award named for my longtime academic colleague Bill Chambliss. Here it is fitting to mention that some years ago, at a meeting of the American Sociological Association held in Toronto, Bill and I participated in a session on “War and Peace.” I advanced the position that the sociologist, and the criminologist, is a witness to the important events of the time—the atrocities, the injustices, the many forms of violence, and the sufferings of many people. My position was, as it continues to be, that the witness is a participant in the essential sense. I thank Bill to this day for being a part of the session, as he had been in other gatherings.
in the course of our careers, a session that continues to be important in my personal and intellectual development.

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We all have waited to be called. We social scientists have answered the call to be witnesses to the world we inhabit. Companions in the long literary and prophetic tradition of the poets, we represent and we present to anyone who will listen the collective consciousness of our times. With the poets of the ages, we can think of ourselves, and our calling, as being the voice necessary for the living of a good life and the creation of a good society.

As witnesses we are appropriately placed—being in the right place at the right time—to actively observe and record what we are witnessing. If other actions more physical in nature follow, they follow because first there has been the witnessing. Without prior witnessing, there will be no subsequent action that is wise and appropriate. Witnesses act with clarity and purpose because they have the awareness and conscience of witnessing. Ready, and with open mind, the witness sees what is happening, and knows what further action needs to be taken. Without witnessing, and without the sensibility of a poet and a prophet, any action is unfocused, misdirected, and little more than a chasing of the wind.

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To be remembered, all the while, is the ultimate objective of compassion and peace. Whatever the technique, whatever the philosophy or theory, the movement toward peace is the true test of any thought or action. Our response to all that is human is for life, not violence and death. Punishment is not the way of peace, and responses to social problems are not to be fueled by hate and revenge, but should be generated by love and nonviolence. Much of what is done in the
name of “criminal justice” is a violent reaction, a threat or application of force, not a reconciliation and creation of a society based on caring and equality. A humanistic existence is possible in what is conceived of as a socialistic society.

This would be a world of peace, finally a world without war—domestically and internationally. What we think and do in the name of “social justice” is one of the paths toward the making of such a world, a path in the creation of structures that make for peace instead of violence. A socialistic humanism gives close and compassionate attention to our everyday existence. Such is the moral philosophy that can guide us as students of law and society. Our efforts and actions are directed to the making of a good society. We are in a world of dreams, certainly—and yet.

A Note About Richard Quinney

Richard Quinney was born and raised on a farm in Wisconsin, and earned a Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin. He has had a career as a professor of sociology at several universities, including the University of Kentucky, New York University, and Northern Illinois University. He is the recipient of the Erich Fromm Award and the Edwin H. Sutherland Award, and a Fulbright Award for research and teaching in Ireland. He is the author of several academic books, including The Social Reality of Crime, Critique of Legal Order, and Class, State, and Crime. In a series of recent books, he has documented the course of a life that combines the everyday world of experience with the transcendent dimension of human existence. Chronologically, these works include Journey to a Far Place, For
the Time Being, Where Yet the Sweet Birds Sing, Once Again the Wonder, A Lifetime Burning, and This World of Dreams. His photographs taken over the years, with meditative attention, are found in his books Things Once Seen, Once upon an Island, and Diary of a Camera. He is the founder of the independent press Borderland Books. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin.