

First Parish Unitarian Universalist, Bridgewater, MA
“Beyond Partisan Division”
Sunday, January 3, 2016 - 10:30am

Reading “Living It - Crossing Political Borders,” Providence UUA General Assembly, 2014, by Paul Roche, one of the founders of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Sterling, Virginia.¹

I grew up an Irish-Catholic in Boston. Like many UUs, I left the Catholic church early on. My wife was not particularly enamored of her Armenian Apostolic faith but eventually decided we wanted some religious education for our children.

I had stumbled across Emerson’s writings and was shocked to find how they resonated in me. So we sought out a UU church. The concept of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning was wonderful and the fact that I could join others in a church setting to do so I found nothing short of amazing. I craved a religion that would allow me to express and develop my own spirituality. Who knew one actually existed?!

We saw enough to like that we settled in as UUs.

I am a believer, supporter, and fighter for human rights – most especially gay rights, women’s reproductive rights, and immigration rights. I have held signs and engaged in conversations at my neighborhood polling places trying to prevent the VA anti-gay constitutional amendment. For these things, my non-church friends and neighbors around the Washington DC beltway think I am a crazy liberal.

But I also believe that the greatest issue facing the US is the impending collapse of our economy – and that the way to fix it is primarily through lowering spending. For the latter and other positions on issues seen as “conservative” I am deemed a crazy conservative by my UU church friends. The difference is: at church it hurts. ...

When friends ask me about my religion, I extol its virtues but I always have to caveat it with “if you can handle the politics.” I do not like having to do that.

We as a religious body take great pains to be inclusive in our language, our music, our readings, etc. – a noble and surprisingly difficult effort. We are engaged in the great work of transforming our congregations to be places of anti-racism, anti-classism, and anti-oppression of all kinds.... I agree strongly with this direction....

It is my proposition that to be truly the church for the 21st century, we will need to welcome ALL those that share the love for our faith and its seven principles, our dreams and our aspirations - but may believe there is a different political path to get there.

To accomplish this we will need to affirmatively include in our screening lens, political leaning....

I am saying - the only way for us to really grow, in numbers and indeed in spirit, is by being inclusive in words and deeds to people who do not necessarily toe the Democratic Party line....

It is my belief that if we would only let it be known that ALL are welcome at our table; that we covenant to be in right relationship with everyone that walks through our doors – even people who just might vote for Mitt Romney, (you know people who might actually upset the UU applecart a little bit) – we could grow in real numbers. Not overnight of course, there is a lot of soul-searching that needs to be done first. But if we could tap the “spiritual but un-churched” folks who hold moderate political views we could greatly increase the impact our actions have on the world. We have a religion here

that is too great to hide under the bushel basket of political dogma. Our UU light shines brightly but we cloak it in political purity....

Finally, as my friend Waldo says: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” Think of the integrity we would foster by engaging all of our UU brainpower in deeper discussions about the issues, rather than jumping to partisan conclusions.

So what needs to happen? How do we live this? Well if you agree with us, and I hope you do, we need you to help do this welcoming work in your congregations. To be clear, I am not asking you to change your political leanings. I am asking you to be courageous and raise an objection when the words of political derision are sprinkled in our sanctuaries. Call people on it.

It is not the conservatives or moderates who will make these changes nor is it just the Liberals, it’s all of us. Please be one of those who helps begin this change. It is not just the right thing to do.

I truly believe our future as a religion depends on it.

Sermon “Beyond Partisan Division” Rev. Paul Sprecher

When I was in eighth grade, in 1963, our small-town middle school was consolidated with a nearby suburban school. I was coming from a school in our small town of Cottage Grove where each grade of 25 or so had one classroom; we joined the suburb of Monona, a relatively affluent town immediately adjacent to Madison, Wisconsin. I was enamored of right-wing politics – an intriguing side of the conservative religion of my family – and I carried a briefcase with a bumper sticker reading “AuH₂O 64” splayed across it; that is, I was a Goldwater fan. Now, as you can imagine, my briefcase with its bumper sticker

made me stick out like a sore thumb. It was not the optimal way to impress with the in-crowd in a new school.

It happened that all of the kids from our rural township were tracked into the middle or lower sections of the four groups in the 8th grade, and at some point early in the year my teachers decided that I was misclassified and proposed that I switch to the upper track. Since I was new to the school, I had just started to make a friend or two, and I didn't want to have to start all over again – so I declined. My English teacher yelled at me in class that I was being ungrateful, that my teachers only wanted what was best for me and – that the principal wanted to see me.

It turned out that C. F. Baime was a pretty unusual principal. He started our conversation by asking what I was reading; I told him that I was reading *God and Man at Yale* by William F. Buckley, his then decade-old diatribe against what he considered Yale's commitment to secularism and to Keynesian economics, which he regarded as a slippery slope on the road to collectivism and – gasp! – socialism. Buckley concluded his chapter on economics with the warning that “Individualism is dying at Yale, and without a fight.”² AND I was reading something from our conservative religious tradition, probably the 1835 *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* by Charles Grandison Finney.

C. F. suggested – mildly – that I should try broadening my reading interests; he suggested that I might read Martin Buber and Paul Tillich and maybe the economist John Kenneth Galbraith. Finally, toward the end of our talk, he gently suggested that I would profit quite a bit if I transferred to the top track, and I agreed. This was the beginning of

a friendship between that lasted for many years. The most dramatic bit was when I agreed to finish roofing his house during the summer of my junior year in college – and fell off the roof! This accounts for the fact that my right arm still has limitations on motion and – incidentally – the reason I was classified 4-F when I was called up for the draft.

As it happens, the political tendency Goldwater ran on – which is generally referred to as “movement conservatism” – is now the dominant ideology of the Republican Party. And we have come to a time in our national history when our political parties have almost no ideological overlap; the percentage of Democrats who would classify themselves as conservative is very low, as is the percentage of Republicans who would identify themselves as liberal. A chasm has opened between the parties and more broadly between the red and the blue parts of our United States. Unfortunately, the dialog among those of different political persuasions has more frequently turned toward diatribe, especially of late.

AND we Unitarian Universalists identify ourselves as members of a liberal religion. Our religious commitments are in particular liberal in that we are creedless – we don’t insist that everyone believe alike in matters of religious doctrine and we welcome everyone regardless of belief – or at least that’s what we say, though in truth Christians sometimes feel less welcomed than Buddhists in many of our congregations. So it’s an easy extension of our religious liberalism to the assumption that we are also politically liberal. When we get into political questions – and, by the way, our faith calls on us to be

active in the public square – many if not most of us would identify with the Democratic Party. If someone were to express a deep concern about the deficits that were incurred to help pull us out of the recent Great Recession as does Paul Roche; or to raise questions about too-ready access to abortion, or – heaven forbid! – about Equal Marriage – the instant response most of us would offer would be “But We’re Liberals!”

And that’s a problem. As Paul Roche said in our reading this morning,

It is my proposition that to be truly the church for the 21st century, we will need to welcome ALL those that share the love for our faith and its seven principles, our dreams and our aspirations - but may believe there is a different political path to get there.³

We *are* liberal in religion, but that does not in fact entail that all of us are or should be liberal in politics. In many of our congregations, people who are drawn to our tolerance of a diversity of religious beliefs fairly quickly discover that our tolerance of political diversity is less apparent.

I’m very concerned about the degree to which our political differences are driving us apart as a nation. And I’m not blind to the probability that the take-no-prisoners tactics of Republicans in Congress during the Obama administration have been mostly responsible for the paralysis of our government’s ability to respond to national and international issues of great urgency, as attested by scholars from the conservative American Enterprise Institute think tank.⁴ But there is real risk to national solidarity when we find ourselves driven apart to such a degree that we can’t even understand how people on the other side could possibly believe what they do, and when we find ourselves

shouting denunciations across a grand canyon of incomprehension over the stupidity of – those people!

So I went back to listen more closely to the politics I had committed myself to in the eighth grade, before I came to believe that Goldwater was a risky bet for the country, and that he would, for example, drag us more deeply into the war in Vietnam. Oh, wait – that happened anyway, didn't it? It seemed to me that it would be useful to try to get a better sense of what movement conservatism really was – and is – about if I was to have any hope of understanding the political beliefs of relatives and neighbors without retreating to saying: “But We're Liberals!”

I went back and read a biography of William F. Buckley and got a better notion of how his politics were critically shaped by the experiences of his father as an entrepreneur in Mexico during the revolution there. I re-read the economics chapter of *God and Man at Yale*, and I started re-reading Barry Goldwater's *Conscience of a Conservative*. I read Ted Cruz's campaign autobiography *A Time for Truth*. I learned that movement conservatism traces its roots back to the reaction by primarily wealthy businessmen against the New Deal in the 1930's. They went on to found and support a number of conservative institutions that have in turn influenced the climate of public opinion against liberalism.⁵ In fact, the movement traces its roots much farther back to the disagreements between Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke over the French Revolution. And I had to re-think whether the French Revolution was in fact a heroic blow for human freedom against the tyranny and backwardness of feudalism or a much more complex social

upheaval that in fact descended into Terror, became deeply destructive, and led the way to Napoleon, founder of a new despotism fueled by endless wars of conquest.

Don't worry. I haven't given up my own political convictions. I haven't reverted to my political commitments in eighth grade. But I have gotten a better appreciation of the complexity of the disagreements between conservatives and liberals in this era. I actually found a lot to like about Ted Cruz and learned that our experiences in our families growing up were not as dissimilar as I might have thought. I found a lot to disagree with and found some of his arguments disingenuous; we were both pretty good debaters in our youth and learned how to frame arguments effectively if not always quite accurately. And I have come to realize that not paying attention to other political viewpoints make my own commitments shallower than they could be. I think Paul Roche is right when he says, "Think of the integrity we would foster by engaging all of our UU brainpower in deeper discussions about the issues, rather than jumping to partisan conclusions."

Our theme for this whole month is "But We're Liberals!" so I just want to begin to sketch what I hope is a more nuanced description of some of the foundations of the most critical political differences between conservatives and liberals.

First, there is a major disagreement about the fundamental nature of human beings, what we might refer to as our respective anthropologies. Our liberal religious traditions rejected the doctrine of original sin over two centuries ago. We say in our child dedication ceremonies – one of which we celebrated just before Thanksgiving, that

Child dedication in our Unitarian Universalist congregations is not the same as baptism or christening, which symbolize a cleansing of original sin. We believe that children are born innocent, and that at the heart of that innocence lies the capacity for both good and ill.

Any parent who believes that their child will remain an innocent and will display *only* signs of good will be disabused of the notion by about the age of two – if not well before that; the “Terrible Twos” come to most of our kids. And those of us who have tried more hands-off modes of discipline often found ourselves with serious behavioral issues to deal with later on.

The thing is that we human beings are frail – we are imperfect. We cannot in fact become everything we might want to be. There are various stories that explain how we humans came to be this way. There’s the story of the Garden of Eden, which sketches an image of perfection, of ease to be found in the garden, followed by a Fall into the difficulties of living in the real world. And there’s another story from Greek mythology – the story of Pandora’s Box – which tells how human beings were comfortable and not oppressed by great evils when Pandora opened the box and let free all of horrors that sometimes beset human lives – and also Hope, which we can always hold on to.

Sometimes religious liberals can seem naïve in not accepting that there is both good and evil in each of us. We have to bear in mind that we are not perfect. And that’s one of the points that conservatives make: People need boundaries, rules, clear directions, and consequences for bad behavior.

So there follows from this a second significant difference, this one about social order, which is one way of giving boundaries to human beings. Conservatives hold that some things are simply sacred in and of themselves. Conservatives in general, for example, see the Constitution as virtually a sacred document that must be understood exactly as the Founders intended it. Many of us who came through the struggle over the Vietnam War lost respect for the flag that was touted especially by supporters of the war. And that's a problem, because in fact the flag is simply a symbol of our United States, and when we allow it to be taken over as an exclusively conservative symbol, it means that liberals can seem to be less patriotic.

One of the issues of social order that I've been struck by in some of the conservative writings is the growing number of out-of-wedlock births. Our Puritan forebears would have regarded this as a serious moral issue, but more broadly the concern is that the outcomes for children in families with a single parent are significantly worse in the majority of cases compared to families with two parents regardless of the gender of the parents. In many cases, it is a result of single mothers abandoned by fathers who refuse to help support their children. Forty percent of all births now occur out of wedlock, and the result is that in many cases the kids suffer. Now, you and I may have different opinions about why this occurs and what – if anything – ought to be done about it, but it's an issue that we should perhaps be more concerned about than we are.

Conservatives tend to regard liberals as being utopians, as believing that it is possible to create a perfect society. But there are risks to attempting to perfect society; for

example, Communism was an attempt to reshape society from the ground up. One of the consequences of that experiment was that anyone who would not conform themselves to the new order had to be set aside, eliminated.

Conservatives tend to be very concerned about systems of constitutional order, especially with systems of checks and balances. They believe that political leaders – for example, presidents, legislators and judges – will inevitably want to increase their power and that we therefore need a system that will check the impulses of all of our leaders to increase the power they wield over our citizens.

Finally, there are significant differences between liberals and conservatives in matters of international relations. There are in fact bullies on the world stage – Putin, for example – as conservatives like to point out. I happen to believe that intense hatred and reactivity against other nations tends to exacerbate conflicts as each side responds to escalations of hostility from the other side. So it's worth trying diplomacy with Iran, for example, as it was with the Soviet Union during the 1980s. But we have to recognize that there are risks. We can say that we want to "Give Peace a Chance," but there are some times of confrontation that require shows of strength as well. In facing Islamic extremism, for example ISIS, we have to recognize that some of our enemies give us no choice but to restrain them with force.

And, of course, life is not all about politics. Paul Roche says this in another part of his presentation:

A hungry family does not care that the person volunteering at the Food Pantry may have voted for John McCain. In the Washington DC area we are blessed to be in a huge melting pot of the world's peoples and faiths. When we break bread at interfaith events no one asks for whom the guy who made the macaroni and cheese (me) voted. I don't care whether the lady who made the Chicken Korma voted at all. We are there to eat and sing and dance and get to know one another – breaking down barriers.

Think about what we could accomplish in the way of human rights, and real social justice if we grew substantially in numbers? We could then become a transformative force for our nation and the world instead of being lumped in as “other liberal religions” in the Pew polls.⁶

I hope we can make First Parish welcoming to a diversity of political opinions alongside our welcoming of our diversity of religious beliefs. I hope we can be welcoming across partisan lines and that by listening closely we can find common ground and help to bridge some of the yawning chasm that threatens to tear our nation apart. Our covenant commits us

To dwell together in peace,
to speak the truth in love,
and to help one another.

“Speaking the truth in love” means listening first – listening deeply – and then formulating our own beliefs and opinions in dialog with those we disagree with.

May we learn to listen deeply, to understand with compassion, and to dwell together in peace.

May it be so, and Amen

***Closing Words** from the Covenant of the GA Workshop
“Beyond Partisan Division”

As we discuss our political and any other divisions, let us:

Be quick to hear and slow to speak;

Respect the privacy of those who confide;

Speak our truth in love;

Offer absolutely no analogies that rely on Nazis, Fascists, or

Stalinist Russia! :);

Call others, and be willing to be called, back into covenant.

AMEN

¹ Paul Roche, “Crossing Political Borders,” UUA General Assembly 2014, Providence, RI, Workshop “Beyond Partisan Division,”

https://www.facebook.com/download/278152955698095/_22Living%20It_22%20-%20Crossing%20Political%20Borders.pdf

² William F. Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of “Academic Freedom,”* Washington, D.C., Regnery Publishing, Inc., (1951), 1977, 1986, p. 101.

³ Paul Roche

⁴ Thomas E. Mann & Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism*, New York: Basic Books, 2012

⁵ Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

⁶ Paul Roche