

Unitarian Universalism: Reaping the Bounty

A presentation by Bill Bradshaw including a sermon by Reverend Jessica Rodela of the First Unitarian Fellowship of Waterloo, Ontario (Can't we get along? Loving your (political) opponent)

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Introduction

Good Morning; How are your gardens doing? and it's harvest time once again.

Some of you may recall last year's presentation about my UU garden with rows of 7 principles. I thought it was a fun metaphor for connecting with our UU principles. In spite of Roger's cracks about gophers and potatoes.

Some big healthy plants, some not so good, but lots of them were intertwined. Most of them were actually connected in some way to the row celebrating the "Inherent worth and dignity of everyone. I don't know if this is the 1st principle by design, but in my garden, most everything else flowed from this in some fashion, or was nourished by it, and it seems like a good centerpiece in my garden.

I wish I could report that my garden was fully grown and ready for harvesting; to be shared with everyone. But alas, that's not the case. I can convince myself that some parts have developed a bit since last December, but for today's harvest, I've gone to another UU garden.

Today, I'll present a sermon delivered by Reverend Jessica Rodela of the 1st Unitarian Fellowship of Waterloo, Ontario. The title is: Can't we get along? Loving your (political) opponent.

This particular sermon resonates with me for several reasons;

- 1) it relates directly to our first UU principle; one that I actively nourish, and without which, my garden would be mostly a weed patch I'm afraid,
- 2) it's timely and germane, not only in light of national politics, but the topic seems to crop up in our Fellowship pretty regularly, and,
- 3) It draws on the Collective wisdom of Unitarian Universalists, which of course is our theme this year.

Clever cynics can reduce most good ideas to weak cliché's. For example, the concept of getting along was mocked superbly by Jack Nickelson in "Mars Attacks". Did anybody see that movie. Remember the scene where President Nickleson makes an impassioned plea to the Martian leader to stop destroying the world, ending with, "can't we all just get along?". Whereupon the Martian immediately annihilates poor President Nickelson with a Martian flag.

Extreme disagreement; but "no" sometimes is the case - "we can't agree on this, and won't get along on it". Respectful disagreement and dialogue however, are much preferred over shouting, accusations, anger, frustrations, and ill will. None of which are likely lead to anything productive, have much to do with respect or dignity, and usually don't feel very good.

Reverend Rodela's sermon offers some insights for disagreeing civilly, while remaining true to our ourselves and consistent with our UU principles; basically advocating that respectful disagreement is our obligation. Certainly bounty from our garden. In Reverend Rodela's words:

* *Ho Hum*

Some eight years ago I had a neighbor, Bruce, who was a dyed-in-the-wool Marine Corps Master Gunnery Sergeant. By his own admission, he fit every stereotype of a bulldog, Rush Limbaugh-listening, war-mongering, church-loving, God-fearing, homophobic stentorian arch-conservative. According to Bruce, I am a tree-hugging, Birkenstock-wearing, pinko-commie, ACLU-loving liberal. It was natural, then, that when my son joined Bruce's Boy Scout troop . . . well, Bruce and I became fast friends.

Ours was a friendship that mystified a number of people, especially our spouses. Once a week the Boy Scouts would meet in my patio, while Bruce and I would sit at my kitchen table, drinking coffee, and discuss politics, religion, and family values. . . *did I say "discuss?"* Because we put the "cuss" in discuss. Our well-behaved spouses would retreat into the living room to discuss parenting and the neighbors. When our boys finished their meeting, they stood at the windows to eavesdrop, marveling at how such shouted argument could turn so fast into sure laughter.

But the only thing that came close to really angering me, frustrating me beyond the bounds of our ability to sit together, to "stay at the table" with one another in friendship, was Bruce's attitude toward compromise. He claimed that "if you compromise, then *everyone* loses. No one gets what they want."

* *Why Bring That Up?*

It is this attitude that characterizes the great failure in political debate today – a failure embodied in the practice of partisanship. Partisanship is a committed bias to support one's special group interests above and beyond the wider good. Partisanship can be narrowly justified by loyalty, but it too often takes the form of "my party do or die, my people right or wrong". Such an uncompromising, unreasoned attitude is inherently unethical and theologically unsound. Unsound, because partisanship presumes dichotomy – and our complex lives transcend the simple dualism of right/wrong, either/or; us/them. And unethical, because Unitarian Universalist values require that we work for the *common* good – that we evaluate with reason, and judge with experience, every decision we make. As Unitarian Universalists, we cannot support the partisan idea that the ends justifies the means. . .for our liberal religion, the means matter. For us, revelation is not sealed, so truth is a process. Ours is a faith of questions, not answers. As such, we practice as spiritual goals resilience and a tolerance for ambiguity, and the ability to see simultaneously but differently.

Liberals and conservatives tend to see things simultaneously but differently – we see simultaneous ends, but with different means. At the core, I've found that my goals differ very little from those of my conservative neighbor's – ultimately, we aim to leave this world a better place than when we found it.

Where we differ is in radically different views about motivation and method. We differ on WHY we want to achieve these goals, and HOW we will do so, WHAT we are willing to sacrifice, and HOW we prioritize the steps, or means, to achieve the goal.

* *For Instance!*

Prioritizing is a key issue in conflict management between cultures. According to something called Values Orientation Theory, there are only five universal values. Five big questions – about religion, human vs. nature, Being-doing, time, and community, that all human cultures are driven to explore. That's a lot of commonality. Yet, the vastly different ways we both prioritize and answer those five questions lead to interpersonal conflict, and can escalate into international war. The prioritizing of our values indicates what compromises – if any – we will make in order to establish peace.

The key to learning to love your opponents – political and otherwise – lies in distinguishing our differences. Perhaps that sounds counter-intuitive. The usual approach to learning to get along with one another is by oversimplifying our similarities and ignoring our differences, as we declare ourselves one big happy family, and we live tolerantly ever after. . . right?

Except *it doesn't work that way*. Instead, we easily see the destination we have in common, but when we disagree on how to get there, we feel mystified, even betrayed, at how “mistaken” our new friend can be, because they seemed so. . . intelligent, and if they just weren't so stubborn, or misinformed, or selfish, then they would see the light and we could get back to agreeing about how *right* I am. . .

This cycle of events is repeated over and over again in heated family disagreements, and neighborhood circles, and our own church lobby. The failure to distinguish our divisions asks for inappropriate compromise. It tempts us to *set aside* differences instead of engaging them. We stand to learn far more from one another in investigating the boundaries of our differences, than had we tried to design each and every meeting, every initiative, or every worship service as “one size fits all.” And such weak-kneed spirituality will lull our souls to sleep.

When we encounter our perceived opponents, and take the opportunity to engage with our differences, either in the world or within the walls of this church, our cherished assumptions are challenged. Divulging our differences requires that we better articulate our positions, and forces us to consider creative options we cannot see when we take a stand, only to face a mirror. Diversity enriches us by increasing our effectiveness in problem solving by widening our field of vision. In the martial art practice of *taekwondo*, a master turns his body *with* the force of his opponent's attack, to gain leverage and advantage. Your opponent's agenda can be your own best friend.

History is full of ironies where the unexpected gift of an opponent serves what seems an opposite agenda. Who remembers that it was Richard Nixon who established the Environmental Protection Agency – reasoning that it was good for business!/? And it was Democrat Bill Clinton, who became the conservative's friend when he signed Welfare Reform into effect – Clinton, who my husband deems, the “best Republican president we've ever had.” Will anyone but my family remember my cousin Marcos, a well-respected Army officer, who registered as a conscientious objector while on active duty to protest our war in Iraq? Whether today, or tomorrow, we deem these actions a triumph or defeat, they serve as examples of why we must be willing and hopeful in working with those we oppose.

The promise and potential of working together lies in our willingness to remember to ask questions and stick around long enough to listen to the answers. That's all. It means when we talk, we do so with curiosity and compassion. **It's about respect.**

Educator Sharon Welch writes: “By respect we do not mean agreement, but taking someone so seriously that you ask *why* they think as they do.” We have to stay at the table with one another, even when it is discouraging, or baffling, or inconvenient because diversity of opinions promotes dialogue. Without dialogue, there is no communication; without communication, there is no education; without education, there is no transformation.

A case in point: when the Boy Scouts of America began blatant discrimination against Unitarian Universalists in general, and against homosexuals in particular, my first reaction was to “take my boys and go home.” But, without families like mine, the Boy Scouts of America would have no dialogue partner. They would be freed from our decent dissent. They would never change their policies, because they would never have them challenged. So, we were prepared – just like good scouting parents are told to be . . . when at a parent's meeting, that uncompromising Scout Leader, my friend Bruce, declared loudly that should the scouts deem homosexuals as fit leaders, that would be the day he quits and “we’ll just see what happens to this troop when *men like me* refuse to lead.”

Without hesitation, my husband replied, “Well, then *men like me* will lead them,” he said, with quiet firmness. “And this troop *will* continue, with or without you.” And with that dozen words of dissent, the assumption and agenda in the room dissolved.

As disconcerting as conflict might feel, if we court only the like-minded, we stand no moderating influence, no witness to oppression. I suspect you agree with me so far. . . That's all very well and good, you might say, but *why* must we do so in church ?

I say to you that it is especially important to grapple with our differences in our churches, and especially appropriate for us as Unitarian Universalists. Because our politics reflects our values, and values create our religion, it is inescapable – even fitting – that these conflicts surface at church. That we employ separation of church and state is a necessary social evolution for a pluralistic community; but it does not negate the fact that religion *is* political. To separate religion from politics renders religion irrelevant and politics lethal. Every one of our seven principles is a political statement, a paradigm of our values and beliefs. We do not turn to liberal religion in order to be told *what* to do but rather to be shown how to *see*. And we cannot – must not – learn where to look by only gazing at our own navels. If we create our church community as a monolith to agreement, we remove the checks and balances vital to our own spiritual growth and we rot in the stagnant pond of our assumptions; we stifle creativity when we are not called to the challenge. To practice choice, we have to be faced with something other than ourselves. As Sharon Welch writes: we need *each other* to be moral.

As Unitarian Universalists, our tradition enjoins us to a prophetic imperative, we affirm that theology IS practice, *service* is its prayer. Our religion IS social action. We *stand for, work for, vote for* -- justice, equity and compassion. And the practical application of our faith is often expressed in our practice of politics.

Legendary minister and pacifist John Haynes Holmes climbed into his pulpit on the eve of World War I, knowing that he could lose his livelihood, knowing he was jeopardizing all he'd ever worked for. In the politics of the time, his views were considered treasonous. He delivered a fiery sermon, denouncing this and all war, as anti-Christian, and instead of a call for arms, he calls for alms; reconciliation; brotherhood. The congregation responded with stunned silence. And Holmes left the pulpit for what he expected would be the last time. The Board President called an emergency meeting.

The church board took two votes that evening. First, they unanimously condemn their minister's pacifism, declaring it to be dangerous, 'wrong-headed,' even treasonous. Second, they voted unanimously that, wrong-headed or not, John Haynes Holmes had an obligation to speak his mind. As Unitarians, they held dear our continuing tradition for right of conscience as expressed in our practice of freedom of the pulpit, a freedom that denies and defeats any possibility of succumbing to the tyranny of the majority; a freedom that recognizes a single dissenting voice as vital to the democratic process of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

* *So What*

Our oft-cited freedom in our faith, extends to our freedom of its expression. During annual commitment campaigns, you hear the challenge: "let your checkbook reflect your values." I extend that challenge today – to let the check BOXES on the ballot reflect your religious values as members of a liberal faith community. As Unitarian Universalists, our seven principles require that we use the democratic process in ways that promote acceptance, spiritual growth, free and responsible search for truth and meaning, *peace, liberty and justice* for all. We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person and thus uphold each one's right of conscience. But in doing so, we do not seek a collective conscience; nor does it imply that we must never take a public stand on controversial social issues. Our covenant guides us in *how* we make a decision as a community, rather than pointing to the decision itself. Our covenant to walk together guides our process, not the content.

Our devotion to diversity guarantees that our parent organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association, will make public sweeping statements that I and other clergy disagree with. It guarantees that from this pulpit, today, or tomorrow, you will hear messages from clergy you profoundly disagree with. Our promise of pluralism guarantees that this church institution will vote to take public stands that threaten or offend you. . . and for all that, I and you and they must, as Unitarian Universalists, stay at the table, because this is about conversation, not consensus. Conflict is inevitable.

It is part and parcel of the design of our free faith community, bound together, not by creed, but by covenant. And by courting that difference, by hosting it here, in our beloved community, we are informed and transformed by diversity. There is fear, I know, a legitimate fear, that if Horizon UU church takes public stands on social issues, it will cost us – in membership and in pledge money. But I guarantee – and our history guarantees – that if you think it costly to take a stand. . . the costs of *not* taking one are far higher. We can choose to turn from or learn from adversity . . . but we can only do that if we consent to conflict. And in today's fearful national climate, it is more important than ever that we be willing to stand up for our right to a decent dissent.

In his time, the Reverend John Haynes Holmes was vilified for his pacifism. Today we acclaim Holmes as prophet and hero. He is. But I also acclaim that brave church board who had the moral courage to vote their religious values above their partisan views and despite looming congregational conflict. In so doing, they created a compromise through covenant, declaring that by staying in relationship with our (political) opponents, we get along much better. In such a compromise, all of us win.

This is our legacy. This *is* Unitarian Universalism.

Work cited from: Welch, Sharon D. *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work*. Routledge: New York, 1999.

Source: 2007 Richard Borden and Paul Holton Awards for Sermonic Excellence