

FIRE AND WATER CAN'T BE MIXED?
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
November 20, 2011

Thank you, Harry, for your reflection and to everyone for being here today as well as thanks to Monica for her music.

This morning I'd like to speak for a few minutes about political dualism in many congregations. That dualism manifests itself as an assumption that everyone in UU congregations is a cultural or political liberal and marching to a common drum. The other side of that dualism is a lack of connection to those who might be called conservative.

In order to explain this dualism, I'd like to mention two Unitarian Universalist communities...you and one in Washington State.

A number of years ago in 2000-2001, I was interim minister at the Evergreen Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Marysville, Washington. I have two stories to share about them as I see many similarities between you.

Here's the first story.

I think Evergreen UU Fellowship started about the same time you did here in the 1950's. They had a similar growth pattern with early meetings in peoples' homes, then a YMCA, then a rented building until they were able to purchase an unused Methodist Church. There was little religious 'either-or' dualism in that congregation. People were all over the map just in their religious identities. Pagans, Buddhists, Christians, and other UU identities were able to sit together on Sundays with great diversity.

They were and are a wonderful group just like you and have had many of the same challenges you and many other congregations have. Money is always tight, peoples' passions for ideas can sometimes get a little conflicted, and there are lots of strong personalities.

I remember that they adored after-service conversation since they did not have 'conversation' time in the service. They'd moved it out of the service because it kept the service over an hour and 10 minutes wasn't long enough anyway.

They loved to get their coffee or tea and come back to the sanctuary to talk about the service. Nothing was off the table. People could talk about joys and sorrows or the sermon. However, the old timers said consistently that they missed most of all the rollicking debates about politics they used to have in the '50's and '60's. People would come in with sharp disagreements about war or civil rights or the legitimacy of the United Nations. People cheerfully argued and held forth for an hour.

At the end everyone would give each other the '50's and '60's equivalent of high-fives, clean their coffee cups and head out to lunch together. What people in 2001 missed was that diverse friendly arguing about sociality and politics that never ended harshly. Everyone understood that disagreements were fine and they were always a fellowship at the end of the day.

By 2001, that had changed and they seldom talked about politics or social justice issues without hurt feelings or anger.

I don't know if this tendency is true at all our congregations but I have seen it particularly in our congregations identified as fellowships.

Consider, however, the paradox. Such fellowships are diverse about individual religious identity. Folks might identify as pagan, Christian, Jewish, humanist, Buddhist and other traditions without too much fuss. Everyone manages to sit together without turmoil or religious conflict on Sundays. You and Evergreen and so many others are naturally inclusive when it comes to religious diversity.

Religious dualism has not been a part of our Unitarian or Universalist heritage. The transcendentalist movement in the 1820's spoke against it. Any idea of "us" versus "them" was alien to our religious thought. Our First and Seventh Principles speak to inherent worth of all people and to the interdependent web of all existence leaving no one out. That's hardly dualistic.

The same is true of many quizzes about religious identity. If you happen to take the Belief.net quiz to determine what religious identity you might have, you'll find that the questions and possible answers are very broad in scope. You might end up Jehovah's Witness and Pentecostal Christian but not likely Buddhist or Unitarian Universalist. That quiz isn't based on 'either/or' responses that lead to absolute religious identity.

One of the quizzes I shared in the reading this morning does support that dualism of politics or ideology. There were always two and only two possible answers. Affirmative action was either needed for fairness or it was outdated. Abortion could be either legal or it needed to be restricted or entirely illegal. That quiz was dualistic in tone and outcome.

That seems in character for what we believe American cultural and political identity defaults to be: you are liberal or conservative. Anyone who identifies as 'moderate' is seen as wishy-washy. I wonder if this 'either/or' philosophy comes from our national history of a Two Party system.

The shorter quiz had three possible answers to each question. Despite its shortness, you could be conservative, liberal, moderate, or libertarian. Those possible identities are not dualistic 'either-or' stances.

So the first question I pose is this: **have you become dualistic in your congregational identity when it comes to politics or social causes?** Put another way, do you believe that you are uniformly liberal when it comes to politics or social advocacy? If so, what do we do about folks like Harry? Is he to be identified as “conservative,” or could he be called Libertarian as one example?

Harry like myself and I suspect many of you is beyond ‘either/or’ in his thinking about politics, religion, or social justice.

I am even willing to bet that you’re all just a little conservative here as shocking as that might sound.

Please recall the opening words this morning. I’d deliberately left out the Unison Affirmation that you pretty much know by heart. You expect and assume it will be after a child or youth lights the chalice.

This morning I changed the structure of the service and left them out. How did that feel? Was it a little disconcerting? Might you have wondered what the interim minister was up to now? Might he have forgotten the usual ritual and you checked your bulletin to be sure?

Were you being conservative or liberal in that moment of change?

One possible answer to that first question of whether you’re dualistic about political identity is that no one is purely one or the other.

There’s a danger, however, that we Unitarian Universalists can become so and that would be tragic. We would be following a trend that author Bill Bishop identified in his landmark book “The Big Sort”. Here are words from a review of the book:

“The two major political parties have become more extreme and can’t find common ground anymore. National civic groups and mainline church denominations have withered away, replaced by smaller, more narrowly focused independent groups. Marketers (and political pollsters) have sliced up the population into increasingly “microtargeted” segments. The three-network era of mass media, which helped create a national hearth of shared references and values, is long gone, displaced by a new media landscape that has splintered us into thousands of insular tribes. We can no longer even agree on what used to be called facts: Conservatives watch Fox; liberals watch MSNBC. Blogs and RSS feeds now make it easy to produce and inhabit a cultural universe tailored to fit your social values, your musical preferences, your view on every single political issue.”

We are encouraged to become Balkanized into smaller groups of like-minded, like-thinking, and like feeling people. Political identity has been a driving force in this sweeping change of the last 40 years.

This leads me to my second question for you: **can you leave politics at the doorway here on Sundays and avoid the dualism and fragmentation that appears to infect much of our American culture today?**

Let me hasten to add here that the forbidden topics police won't swarm upon you should you mention at coffee hour a particular Democratic or moderate Republican or Libertarian candidate you admire. What it would mean that during the service in this sanctuary, we all would make an effort to avoid talk that expresses our pleasure in various political stances or displeasure in others' positions.

Any such conversations would be most welcome at an after service conversation about the sermon or the topic of the day.

Is this a viable option? I don't know but I do think that we must avoid the temptation to **believe we must all think alike to love alike.**

This brings me to my second story about Evergreen UU Fellowship. Some of you have heard this story before and so bear with me in its retelling.

I'd offered the first Jesus Reconsidered class that I also did here last fall. A number of outside folks from Marysville and Everett Washington came to the class including a gay man named Bob. He was so thrilled about the class that he asked me if his partner could come along with him. I said "of course" and they came to all the other classes.

They began to attend on Sundays, too. Eventually they both decided to join Evergreen. I asked Bob if he'd like to say a few words at the New Members Sunday about why he and his partner wanted to join.

He stood up and shared their tragic story of being shunned at other churches and even being thrown out of their home because they were gay partners. He and his partner had felt at home and very loved at Evergreen since their first Sunday. They both wanted to commit themselves to inclusive religion there.

Then he went on to mention (and remember this was the spring of 2001) that he felt welcome and entirely supported at Evergreen. I was watching the congregation and they were to a person beaming with pride at the good, inclusive feelings shared.

Bob then went on to mention that he and his partner enjoyed being at such an accepting congregation where he could say that he voted for George W. Bush in the prior November and no one would be the slightest upset. He was, after all, a Log Cabin Republican of many years.

I watched the mind-set of the congregation go into temporary paralysis for a long moment. Minds struggled to get out of their political comfort zones. It was, as is said now, a teachable moment for them.

Such teachable moments exist here today in many of our congregations and perhaps this one as well.

How can we create a rich space for folks like Harry or others here who might be called Libertarian or fiscal conservatives?

Can we break loose from that trend toward political homogeneity in American life?

Can a wide range of political and cultural stances exist here while honoring our covenant that says “...**To dwell together in peace/to seek the truth in love/and to help one another.**”

What do you think?