

Divided We Stand
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We begin this month with the theme “Tell me a story about a time when you felt really alive.” I remember the last time I felt really alive in American politics. It was Tuesday night, November 4, 2008. I was sitting in church at an election night watch party and when the final results were in, the room erupted in shouts and cries and tears and stomping the ground and an array of emotions that most of us had never witnessed each other express before. It was, of course, the first time that Barack Obama had been elected to the office of the President of the United States of America and like millions of other voters, we were profoundly hopeful for the vision of America that his rhetoric created to materialize. I looked forward to the next four, and hopefully eight years of prosperity, a new era in racial justice, attention to the environment, a growing economy, restored respect in international affairs, and all the values that I hold dear being held up and supported by policy in the public sphere.

At the same time, I was vaguely aware of the millions of people who sat at home, darkly staring at the television sets or computer screens, feeling that not only did their candidate lose, but that something precious was now lost in their public sphere; that for them the coming years would mean the government will play a bigger and more intrusive role in people’s lives; continued support for legal abortions, the forced acceptance of same sex marriages, higher taxes, less support for the military, and a dismissive attitude from liberals about the values held by religious conservatives.

To be honest, I was so elated that my candidate and my party won, that I didn’t think much or care about the other side. I was determined to ensure that the values I cared about would prevail.

Fast forward now, to eight years later, and here we are, two days away from another historic election. Eight years ago, we either celebrated or mourned the election of a bi-racial Barack Obama. This year, we will either celebrate or mourn the election of the first woman as President, or the first non-professional politician as President. Although our opening hymn was written in the 19th century, we seem to be faced with the same dilemma: “once to every soul and nation, comes the moment to decide...” We may be wondering, how on earth can I bring my best spiritual self to this election and its aftermath?

My colleague, and minister affiliated with this congregation, The Rev. Karon Sandberg, offered a very fine sermon this past summer, which I commend to you, entitled “Inherent worth and Dignity: Does This Apply to the Election?” It was a prescient sermon in that she identifies exactly the same struggles with which we face right now. She noted how difficult it was to have a relationship with a relative whose beliefs she could not share. She wrote about how so many of us tend to cluster into neighborhoods, groups, workplaces where we find “like-minded people,” and then make those places safe havens, of which the Fellowship is one such place.

Please don’t hear this as a critique, of course. There is an ease and a comfort to be with others with whom you don’t have to be on guard. It is a place where values are strengthened, supported and shared and that is important too. It’s essential really, and it’s why this place, this Fellowship is so important, and with your on-going support, must continue to exist and thrive in the Fox Valley.

At the same time, our desire to segregate ourselves not just by race, but by values, culture,

and class has helped to create the worst gridlock in the United States House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate this country perhaps has ever known. Right now, instead of united we stand, divided we fall, we truly are, for the moment, still standing as a nation, but deeply and seemingly intractably divided.

Although some might argue that politics should stay out of religion and vice versa, I would argue that both politics and organized religion are expressions of an underlying moral imperative; both are ways in which we humans attempt to put our values into the public sphere. I don't profess that one sermon will shed light on how we might heal these divides, particularly after this Tuesday's election, but what I do want to do is examine two questions that are on my mind and heart; and perhaps have been on yours too: Why, as a nation, are we so divided and what might we – as spiritual and religious people – do about it? To do that, I'll avoid the political pundits! You get enough of those on TV every day! Instead, I want to reference the work of two scientists, the cognitive neuroscientist Tali Sharot, and the social scientist, Jonathan Haidt, and in the end come back to a public theologian, Parker Palmer, to help us understand where we need to go.

One of the ways that people of faith in most traditions try to heal the divide is to trust that if we can engage with “the other” we can attempt to understand “where they're coming from” and that will help heal divides. Our faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism has historically defaulted to using reason and science-based facts to inform our efforts at mutual understanding. We believe that both political and religious beliefs should be like any other subject – amenable to rational discussion and to the tests of the scientific method. Our modus operandi tends to be: “If reasonable claims about reality cannot be tested adequately to see which one is true, then people of good will can agree to disagree. This is the world we wish we could live in.”¹

So, as a good Unitarian Universalist myself I presume: “If we can just think rationally about the issues in this election, then perhaps we can find common ground.” Nope! – It doesn't really work that way in political discourse, at least according to Tali Sharot. Sharot confirms my own father's oft-repeated advice to his kids when we were trying to convince him of something: “don't bother me with the facts, my mind's made up.” In a disturbing article entitled “Why Facts Don't Unify Us,” Sharot writes that “While some of the issues dividing us boil down to ideology and preference... do numbers and figures change people's opinions? Apparently they do – but rather than bring people together they result in a deeper divide. Those who are inclined to believe a certain way are not dissuaded by scientific fact or a rational argument, but their views can be confirmed and hardened by whether or not they hear factual “good news” or “bad news” about the opinions they already hold.

So, for example, using climate change as a test example, he writes, “Weak believers in human-enhanced climate change will not be dissuaded by evidence that climate scientists distorted their statistics, but reinforced in their beliefs by a documentary showing a faster rate of ice melt in Greenland. For skeptics about climate change the opposite is true. The divide just deepens as people toss around their facts.”

What this current election cycle has made abundantly clear is that facts about policies don't matter as much as personal experience, instinct, intuition, and the community that surrounds you. In Jonathan Haidt's book, “The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion,” he suggests that people make their moral decisions more automatically, using personal emotional responses and group identification rather than individual rationality. So, for example, I may hear one of the candidate's speeches and think “well that's just silly and appealing to the worst in human nature,” while my fellow American citizen finds himself cheering because it affirms what Haidt calls a moral intuition. It's not about the facts; instead, it is a valid way of knowing. It's what we mean by “gut instincts.” What we think

¹ Sermon, Wayne Arnason. Jonathan Haidt

about a candidate confirms what we already feel about what's right and what's wrong and influences our party identification and our vote.

What's been so striking about this election, more so than others in recent history, is how those who have felt disempowered, discouraged and depressed have turned to a voice and a leader who articulates for them all that has gone wrong with the United States, and offers simple solutions to fix it. We are told that these people are angry, and expressing that in the way they are voting.

They are angry because it's become very clear that the way of life that they have enjoyed for decades is coming to an end. Social changes that have created job insecurity, new roles for women, growth in communities of color and changing gender roles make for a puzzling and confusing world. The responses endorsed by this group of voters in some polls are alarming. One well-publicized poll during this election season described an astonishing 75% of identified supporters of one candidate endorsed banning Muslims from the United States; a third of this same group would endorse banning gays and lesbians from the country, and most astonishing, a 20% endorsement of the statement that Lincoln shouldn't have freed the slaves.

It's hard for my liberal rational mind to process this kind of response from one segment of our body politic, but I was helped by an article I read recently citing the work PhD candidate Matthew MacWilliams of the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He has been researching the "authoritarian personality" – not actual dictators, but rather the psychology of voters who are attracted by candidates who they believe can fulfill their desire for order and respond to their fear of outsiders.² Here's the essence of MacWilliams' research:

"Authoritarians are thought to express much deeper fears than the rest of the electorate, to seek the imposition of order where they perceive dangerous change, and to desire a strong leader who will defeat those fears with

force. They would thus seek a candidate who promised these things. And the extreme nature of authoritarians' fears, and of their desire to challenge threats with force, would lead them toward a candidate whose temperament was totally unlike anything we usually see in American politics — and whose policies went far beyond the acceptable norms." MacWilliams suggests that people with authoritarian personality types are not uncommon and that we see this type expressed in family life and in self-chosen social groupings. However, we have not seen the authoritarian personality emerge as a unifying political force within American politics before. This fear of loss of control and social change has always been there, but no one knew how to push the right political buttons to activate this fear all at once until now.

There's one more thing that's always been there in the United States that has been re-energized by this election and that's the foundational racism that's been part of our public life from the nation's beginning. As our country becomes more diverse, as inflated hopes about what electing a black President could mean have been shipwrecked on the rocks of institutional racism within the criminal justice system, more white Americans are confronting race in a way they have never had to before. It's creating a perfectly awful storm regardless of which party you do or do not choose to affiliate with.

I don't know about you – but there's a part of me that can't wait for the election to be over so we can go back to "normal," but then I come to grips with the fact that there is no "normal" any longer, not for political conservatives or political liberals.

This election has shaken up our understanding of those who feel disenfranchised on all sides of the political spectrum in a way that, while painful, has been eye-opening and forced us to confront some ugly truths: the American dream is not being fulfilled for too many us. We don't need to be arguing about "who" is entitled to feel the most disappointed or betrayed. That is what has been most heart-breaking about this year's election. The commonly accepted values of the public square -

² <http://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>

civility, honesty and integrity - are compromised in the interests of depicting your constituency as the most abused. We keep going lower and lower, like a limbo game, until the bar is so low that fewer and fewer good people tempted to give themselves to public service will want to go under it in order to win election.

One member of our Fellowship said to me, “Even after the election, one group or another will be feeling disenfranchised, and they are not going away. How can we heal from this?”

I deeply appreciated her question, and to find answers, I turned to another teacher of mine, the Quaker theologian Parker Palmer. His book “Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit,” was written in 2011, during a similarly tumultuous time, and is still relevant today. Palmer writes: “The politics of our time is the “politics of the broken-hearted,”—an expression that will not be found in the analytical vocabulary of political science or in the strategic rhetoric of political organizing. Instead, it is an expression from the language of human wholeness.

There are some human experiences that only the heart can comprehend and only heart-talk can convey. Among them are certain aspects of politics, by which I mean the essential and eternal human effort to craft the common life on which we all depend.”³

The question that I wish all the candidates for President would ask the American people is this one: “What are the essential and eternal tasks which we must do to craft a common life upon which we all depend?” We become divided by issues – the 2nd Amendment, abortion, separation of church and state. All have their importance of course, and all have an impact on how we wish to live our lives. At the same time, the spiritual imperative our politics demands from us, is to deepen our ability to be empathic to those things and those people which and who we do not understand, not because we

will ever rationally agree on policies or programs, but because being seen and being heard is as important as being right.

Parker goes on to say: “When all of our talk about politics is either technical or strategic, to say nothing of partisan and polarizing, we loosen or sever the human connections on which empathy, accountability and democracy itself depend. If we cannot talk about politics in the language of the heart – if we cannot be publicly heartbroken, for example, that the wealthiest nation on earth is unable to summon the political will to end childhood hunger at home, how can we create a politics worthy of the human spirit, one that has a chance to serve the common good?”⁴

The point of this is then, is not to change the mind of another, for that will be a lost cause; but for us to find ways to bridge the great divide that exists between us. And that place can only be found in the heart.

“..The heart” says Parker Palmer “is where everything begins: that grounded place in each of us where we can overcome fear, rediscover that we are members of one another, and embrace the conflicts that threaten democracy as openings to new life for us and for our nation.”

We began this sermon with a poem by Amiri Baraka, and I want to come back to his voice to conclude. His “short speech to my friends” reminds us what we can do to heal:

A political art, let it be
tenderness, low strings the fingers
touch, or the width of autumn
climbing wider avenues, among the virtue
and dignity of knowing what city
you’re in, who to talk to, what clothes
—even what buttons—to wear. I address
the society the image, of common utopia.

This image of “common utopia” is not a far off land out of reach, but is grounded instead in the common decency of shared human living and the common good in our hearts and minds,

³ Parker, Palmer J. *healing the Heart of Democracy* (New York: 2011) , pg. 11

⁴ Ibid, pg. 16.

still alive among us this election week, and in all the years ahead. May it be so.

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