

## **Our Divided Political Heart**

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

November 11, 2012

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

It is going to be a very interesting Thanksgiving for me this year. Every year my family and I make the trek back to Michigan for four days to spend the holiday with my parents and our extended family. Most years this is a pleasant enough excursion filled with good food and reconnecting with cousins. It's mostly about seeing the grandkids these days. Inevitably, however, the conversation will probably turn to politics, despite my best efforts to avoid the subject. Most of my family members don't usually talk religion with me unless it is to ask a question about Buddhism. They are mostly liberal Christians, so there isn't much we disagree on. However there are divisions within the Snyder clan around politics.

Of course this is not atypical, particularly for people living in Michigan. Like some states it tends to go for the Democrats, but there are plenty of rural conservative areas that are Republican. My family lives in a rural area, but in the liberal eastern part of the state. So there is a complicated political mix. This is what makes Thanksgiving so

potentially contentious. My uncle Ed is a Republican through and through—a life-long member of the NRA, gun rights are his favorite political issue. I am perhaps the most politically liberal person he knows, and so I tend to be the lightning rod for his frustrations. So you can imagine that I had some mixed emotions last Tuesday. I was pleased that Barak Obama won, but I knew that this meant Ed will be fired up all the more when we make our annual pilgrimage home. The fact that Debbie Stabenow, a Democratic senator from Michigan, was reelected as well, does not help my cause.

I am sure I am not alone here. The political divisions that have characterized American politics for at least the past ten years have gone well beyond politics. There is a very real sense that what started off as political division has seeped into the wider American culture to affect everyday life too. Once upon a time, I heard that politicians used to disagree over the issues by day, and then go to dinner that evening as colleagues. I say “Once Upon a Time” because those days that feels like a fairy tale. And this isn’t just because there was an election this year. Now the acrimony starts in the two years leading up to the election when one party or the other, and both have done it, dig in their heels and collectively decide to do nothing so that their opponent cannot claim any election year victories. While one side or the other may “win” the election with this tactic, the country as a whole surely loses.

Loss is part of our monthly theme in November, and quite intentionally chosen for this election year. Someone pointed out to me this week that what if there is victory instead of loss. What do you do then? Ah, but for someone here this morning last Tuesday was a loss. We should have no illusions that there is political consensus here at First Unitarian Church. Some of you I know are ecstatic and celebrating the results of the election. Others of you; not so much. While Michelle spoke these words earlier, I think this morning they bear repeating. “No matter your political affiliation, you are welcomed here.”

This is an important thing to affirm as a Unitarian Universalist church, because it is so counter to our overall culture. The political writer and commentator E.J. Dionne, in his book that inspired this sermon entitled “Our Divided Political Heart,” says that the deep division in our country between liberals and conservatives stems from differing interpretations of American history. Liberals read that narrative of the “American story” and come away with one set of lessons and values, while Conservatives read the “American story” and come away with an entirely different set of lessons and values. There is something in American culture that loves dualism: Colonists vs. British, North vs. South, leading up to Prohibition it was Dry vs. Wet, in the Cold War Reds vs. Patriots. The Cold War gave way to the Culture Wars which is the beginning of the radical split between the Liberals and Conservatives.

Interestingly, Unitarian Universalism, which is as homegrown American religion as they come, completely reverses this dualistic approach. We like oneness, what philosophers call “monism” as opposed to “dualism.” Unitarians didn’t like God split into three persons. They preferred to understand God as a unity—hence the origin of the name “Unitarian.” But the real monists, the people who most certainly abhorred dualism even when it came from the words of Jesus himself at times, was the Universalists. They refused to believe that God divided humanity into the sheep and the goats, the saved and the damned, the good people headed to heaven versus the evil people who were going to hell. The Universalists pointed out that it isn’t about how we as human beings act, salvation is about how widely and how deeply God loves us. They believed that that love is applied “universally” and therefore we are all “saved” in some sense of the word. In the twentieth century, as they became more aware of other religions and cultures, the Universalists applied this same monistic logic to say that people are saved regardless of their religion or ethnicity. That was a pretty radical assertion for people like Clarence Skinner to make at a time when the rest of the world was busy squaring off into opposing sides to fight World War One. The famous Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes of New York, one of the founders of the ACLU and the NAACP, left the Unitarian denomination, as did his church, when the Unitarians endorsed

the war. By the way, speaking of World War One: Happy Armistice Day!

So Unitarian Universalists find themselves in a somewhat awkward position. On the one hand we love our politics and getting involved in social issues that are aligned with our vision of a world made just and fair for everyone. However in getting there we often have to incorporate a lot of the dualism that is a fundamental part of American political life. Yet our religious DNA says that we are all one, universally.

Easily the best workshop I attended at General Assembly last June in Phoenix was lead by some of my Joseph Priestley District colleagues around the Washington DC area. I wonder if UUs who serve the dualistically charged atmosphere around Washington DC feel this tension within our faith more so than others. This was a so-called Justice GA where everything was focused on social action, and especially around immigration issues. Arizona has particularly oppressive laws and practices regarding illegal immigrants. This was the tenor and tone to practically every event at General Assembly. Which made this particular workshop so unique.

My friends from DC presented a series of real life vignettes, followed by some short homilies, on what it is like to be politically conservative and a Unitarian Universalist in our congregations. We

heard the stories of people who feel ostracized within their own spiritual home; too afraid to speak their minds for fear of being shunned or shamed by their fellow Unitarian Universalists. It was heart breaking to hear. These stories were then followed by messages of hope and reconciliation that were powerfully preached—definitely the best preaching I heard at General Assembly. I was sitting next to my friend Roger Berchausen, the Senior Minister in Appleton Wisconsin. When it was done, he and I looked at each other in rapturous silence, inspired; both of us eating up what we had just heard.

Most of the rest of attendees were not so impressed. In fact they rather lit into the presenters for giving “aid and comfort to the enemy” essentially. I was stunned by the reaction. I walked out thinking that politics is the last bastion of creedalism in Unitarian Universalism. The assumption is that “If you don’t believe how you are supposed to in politics, then you are not one of us.”

Creedalism is the notion that we define our religion based on our beliefs, and it is the origin really of dualism. Unitarian Universalists define our religion not on belief but on covenant—that we are committed to being in relationship with each other while acknowledging and hopefully celebrating our differences. That is why we include “political affiliation” in our welcome every Sunday. Fortunately in Delaware, the liberal and conservative divisions are not as pronounced as they are in other states I have lived in like Michigan, and especially

Nebraska. I have hope that we can have a robust debate about political opinions without making it personal. I don't think we should eliminate political parties or even differences in the public sphere. What I don't agree with is intensifying those differences to the point where we cannot be in the presence of the other—at the Thanksgiving table or elsewhere.

As he so often does, Parker Palmer shows us the way forward. He is a spiritual genius and if you are unfamiliar with his writings, I urge you to get your hands on them immediately. Technically he is a Quaker, but I am sure there are people at UUA headquarters working around the clock trying to figure out a way for us to claim him as a Unitarian Universalist so that we can print his name on our coffee mugs and T-shirts! He makes the same basic point that E.J. Dionne does, only from a spiritual point of view rather than a historical one. And that is this: we need to return to Lincoln's charge to nation in his Second Inaugural Address: "With malice toward none and charity for all." Lincoln of course lived in what was probably the most divided period of American history. He felt the tension between the dualism of North versus South that created the Civil War, and the more pressing need as the war ended, to unite those dualistic forces together. He had become an adherent of unity; monism.

And so too should we. I think that for too long both parties have been instilling in us fear of the other. In this sense they preach the same message: woe unto you and to your country for the next generation if the

other side wins this year! This message arouses our passion and therefore our motivation to head to the polls on Election Day. But it is also a highly manipulative message. If I am supposed to have legitimate fear that the other political party might prevail, then it is a very short emotional distance to travel for me to apply that fear to everyone who voted for that “other” candidate. It is good to have differing political opinions. It is good to care passionately about those political opinions, to work to elect your candidate of choice. And it is especially good to work in between elections to assist our elected leaders to achieve success around issues important to the common good. But demonizing other people, and assuming they are evil or have evil intent simply because you or I might disagree with their opinions is most assuredly not OK. “Malice toward none, and charity for all.” Unitarian Universalism teaches us that differences are good; they should be celebrated among us because diversity enriches the whole. It is not an easy way to be together as a church. It is complex and messy and it demands of us that we be spiritually mature people who are comfortable with lots of grey area. But while that demand is high, so too is the pay off. At our best moments we are a community that affirms and welcomes everyone—just as we aspire to do every Sunday in our Welcome and in our Unison Affirmation.

Last month First Unitarian Church hosted a ministers group called IMAC. It is a group made up primarily of African American clergy in



the city of Wilmington, which my colleague Paula Mariano is active in. She invited me to join the group for its meeting. Thanks to her leadership IMAC decided to hold their meeting at First Unitarian Church—a long ways off from where they normally are. I can't tell you how appreciative they were for our hospitality, and how warmly I was welcomed among them. The highlight of the meeting though, was when one of the Senate candidates was invited to speak. This was a fellow who knew he was not going to win, and he probably guessed that most of the people in the room were not going to vote for him. By the standards of secular American politics there should have been tons of tension in the room with all of us aware of our divisions; racially, politically, theologically. Yet none of that was there. The candidate acknowledged some of these differences, but he didn't apologize for them; and why would he? He is who he is. I was impressed by the collegial nature of the conversation that was focused on the issues and the common good for the state. No one decried this candidate, and the feeling in the room was very friendly. I was pleased and proud to have been there. This is what it should be like, I thought. We are not blind to our differences, yet they do not dominate our interaction with each other. As a result we can have a much deeper discussion about common issues because there is at least a modicum of trust across those differences. This is the vision that Parker Palmer and E.J. Dionne articulate for our

nation. I think it is a compatible vision with Unitarian Universalism at its best. It sure felt that way.

Let us pray that the forces of unity begin to heal the forces of dualism in our culture and at least a little bit in our politics too. I was heartened to hear Barak Obama's acceptance speech in which he articulated a vision of unity and cooperation in his second term. I hope that he means it, and that others are inspired by his vision to meet him half way. May we seek to overcome our divisions, in whatever form they may take, to risk making a connection to the "other" however we have come to define them. May we have the courage to live according to a vision of unity and healing. And may that courage be contagious throughout our culture and our nation. Amen Blessed Be.