

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Making Peace with our Politics”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 2, 2008

Sermon

Before I begin, I need to let you know, I will not be joining the Pulpit Freedom Campaign instigated by the Alliance Defense Fund and endorsing any candidates from the pulpit today.

The Alliance Defense Fund is a Christian based freedom of religion group that wants to challenge the 1954 law written by Lyndon Johnson that prohibits clergy of non-profit religious organizations from endorsing candidates from the pulpit. The ADF believes this violates my free exercise of religion by limiting my speech in the pulpit. Thirty some preachers have endorsed candidates from the pulpit and sent the text of their sermons to the IRS hoping to generate a lawsuit that likely would go to the Supreme Court. So far I haven't read of any IRS action against them.

Actually, I really don't need to endorse a candidate from the pulpit. I expect many of you are already going to vote the same way I will, given the liberal politics professed by many of our members. Some have called Unitarian Universalism “the religious arm of the Democratic Party.” I don't agree with this sentiment. I want to let the Republicans in our congregation know that I will defend them and make room for their perspectives here. Although I am registered Democrat, I'm not a true believer in government, regulation and taxes as the solution to all problems. I am sympathetic to a number of Republican ideas as I am sympathetic to a number of Democrat ideas and believe in the balance between the two ideologies.

And, realistically, given the oppositional nature of our anti-authoritarian sentiments, if I tried to tell people how to vote here, they would more than likely vote the other way ... to spite me!

So rather than talk about the candidates, I want to talk about one of the most important issues in this campaign that isn't being talked about much. That is, making peace with our politics.

We have endured almost eight years of a President who believes in making war with his politics. After the defining moment of the beginning of the 21st century, the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11th, President Bush initiated the endless war on terror. The last seven years have been the most violent for us since the end of the Vietnam War. President Bush has framed it with apocalyptic language of the war of good against evil. He identified three nations, Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, as part of the axis of evil. Now we are mired fighting ideological wars (to salvage failed states in Afghanistan and Iraq) with our hands stuck to the tar baby.

Whichever candidate for President takes office, the most important first step they must take is to change direction from a policy of war making to a policy of peace making and the promotion of nonviolence.

I don't believe domestic or international war making has ever been a wise policy but now it is more dangerous than ever. The continuing technological advance in our capacity to wreak destruction is not only led by us. Other nations have also developed these tools of terror for export. The weapons arrayed against our troops overseas get more and more sophisticated and more and more deadly.

The most fearsome weapons, of course, are nuclear bombs but biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction could also devastate whole cities. A thousand years ago, it took a huge army of strong, fearless men carrying bows, arrows, swords, spears, battering rams and catapults to conquer a city. Today, technology magnifies the power of a small band to create massive damage.

Though a small group of men can turn commercial jets into weapons, they need a lot of support to be effective. We must always remember one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter. Without a strong base of disaffected people with access to resources, no insurgency can endure for long.

Today the United States has been fighting an enemy that occupies no land that can be taken and conquered. All of the billions of dollars we have tied up in weaponry are useless against a surprise attack by a suicide bomber. Non-state opponents like al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the FARC can have a cell anywhere in the world and strike from anywhere. There are no armies facing each other on a traditional battlefield anymore. Occupying land does not motivate terrorists. Their purposes are ideological. They desire to weaken us as a threat to them and eventually destroy us as an empire. The battle they wage is more like a virus infecting us and then bringing us down from within. Given our current financial collapse, I'd say they are feeling like they are being pretty successful.

Military strategists call this "fourth generation warfare" and no one has figured out a successful strategy to defeat it. But interestingly, weaknesses in this form of warfare have been observed. Strategists have noted that al Qaeda in Iraq failed and the Taliban also lost support because of the rigidity of their ideology. William Lind who writes for the libertarian web site antiwar.com quoted from a paper prepared for the American Political Science Association by Australian political scientist Andrew Phillips. Phillips argues that, by their nature, al-Qaeda affiliates tend to alienate their hosts. He writes:

"In successive conflicts ranging from Bosnia to Chechnya to Kashmir, the jihad jet-set has rapidly worn out its welcome among local host populations as a result of its ideological inflexibility and high-handedness, as well as its readiness to resort to indiscriminate violence against locals at the first signs of challenge.... That this pattern has so frequently been repeated suggests that the underlying causes of al-Qaeda's defeat in Iraq may transcend the specific

circumstances of that conflict. Baldly stated, the causes of al-Qaeda's defeat in Iraq can be located in its ideological DNA."

This is very interesting observation for both sides of the struggle. Indiscriminate violence against locals works against the United States as well. What about our inflexibility and high handedness in the execution of the war in Iraq? Remember the beginning of the occupation when we were not able to maintain security and permitted the governmental systems to dissolve into chaos? Could our problems in Iraq be drawn from Bush's ideological DNA too? I think so.

I think we need some gene therapy. We need to explore the roots of violence as a way of understanding how to create a world without it. One great book I read this summer in preparation for talking about making peace this fall was James Gilligan's *Preventing Violence*. Gilligan has been on the faculty of Harvard Medical School since 1965. For over twenty-five years he has directed psychiatric services in Massachusetts prisons and in their mental hospitals. He has worked intensively with the most violent people in our society trying to understand them and unpack their propensity for violence.

Gilligan points out that for over 4000 years, from the first law codes ever written down, we have been labeling violent behavior as evil and punishing people for it. So far this method of *preventing* violence through justice and punishment has been a failure. It may satisfy the public's desire for revenge but it doesn't stop violence from happening in the first place.

Certainly people have been examining how to prevent violence for much of that time. The various attempts at prevention, even today, tend to be too localized, short-term and usually under-funded. Violence prevention is not something that can be accomplished by individuals or even by organizations. One of the greatest advocates of non-violence, a carpenter named Jesus from Nazareth, spawned a worldwide church that, at times, has been the instigator of horrific violence such as the Crusades and the Inquisition. Today, with our ever-expanding capacity to be violent, "learning how to prevent violence, Gilligan believes, "is an absolute prerequisite for human survival during the coming century."

Gilligan and other researchers claim that being violent is not a natural state for almost every human being. Violent behavior is stimulated by a sense of shame and a threat to self-identity. When he asked criminals why they had acted violently, they most often said, "Because he disrespected me." For example:

[Gilligan] could not understand why one of the prisoners [he worked with] was engaged in a running battle with the prison officers that resulted in his finally being sentenced to solitary confinement and having every privilege and possession taken away from him. [Gilligan] asked him, "What do you want so badly that you are willing to give up everything else in order to get it?" ... In response [the] man, who was usually so inarticulate that it was difficult to get a clear answer to any question, astonished [him] by standing up tall,

looking [him] in the eye, and replying with perfect clarity: "Pride. Dignity. Self-esteem." ... "If you ain't got pride, you got nothin'."

At the root of violent behavior, Gilligan persuasively argues, is warding off the feeling of shame and humiliation, feelings so painful that, for many, they are unbearable. Violence attempts to replace shame with pride through lashing out toward others or the part of the self, identified as the source of shame. Anything that causes the feeling of being slighted, insulted, disrespected, dishonored, disgraced, distained, slandered, treated with contempt, ridiculed, teased, taunted, mocked, rejected, defeated, being subjected to indignity; feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, incompetency, feelings of being weak, ugly, a failure, "losing face," being treated as unimportant and worthless, causes real injury to people. It hurts deeply. It threatens one's identity and generates rage. It will cause people to lash out in self-defense as much as any physical injury.

This isn't a new idea. Gilligan points out that the first act of violence in the Bible, the story of Cain and Abel, is an illustration of the link between shame and violence. In a flagrant illustration of bad parenting, the Lord prefers Abel's offering of the fatted portion of his flock and rejects Cain's offering of the fruit of the earth. Cain was shamed and grew very angry. God doesn't recognize the trouble and further shames poor Cain saying, "if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." Cain cannot master it and kills his brother.

Gilligan would like us to move away from the law and order approach to violence. If prison were an effective technique to prevent violence, we would be the most peaceful civilization on earth; given how many people we incarcerate each year.

Gilligan believes we should take a public health approach to violence, treating it as we would a public health risk. If shame is the root cause of violence and if we work hard to uproot shame in our culture, it should have a profound affect on violent behavior. In fact, this is what Gilligan did in the Massachusetts prison system. By changing the culture of prisons and the relationship of guards to inmates, over time he saw a dramatic decline in violence. If the most violent people in our society respond to being treated with respect and dignity, why wouldn't the rest of us?

What would this world be like if the cornerstone of our foreign policy was to treat everyone, even our enemies, with respect? What if we acted as if every being on this planet had inherent worth and dignity? What if we agreed to eliminate American exceptionalism. What if we joined the world court and submitted our national behavior to the rule of law? I suspect it would change how our nation is currently viewed by rest of the world.

Now for the reality check. I am not naïve enough to believe that if we all hold hands and sing Kumbayah everything will be okay. We live in a world that cannot tolerate failed states that become safe havens for anti-social elements. We cannot

permit governments to eliminate their citizens' civil rights and commit genocide against them. There is a place for the use of force in our world.

Still, violence cannot create a sustainable peace. The only legitimate use of force must be in the service of the reduction and the prevention of harm. We must make peace to win the hearts and minds of the people of the world. Making peace begins with a willingness to talk without preconditions. Making peace requires a fundamental respect for all parties, especially one's opponents. Making peace requires honesty and integrity of action.

So when you go into the voting booth on Tuesday, I urge you to vote for the person you believe can move us toward making peace rather than making war. The core principle of inherent worth and dignity of every person is at stake. To deal with the looming crises of our time, global climate change, nuclear proliferation, worldwide public health, pandemic prevention, resource sharing and preservation, sustainability and peak oil, the whole world must come together peacefully to respond effectively.

All I'm really saying, is give peace a chance!

Benediction

The Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (commonly referred to as UNESCO) begins with these words:

The Governments of the States Parties to this Constitution on behalf of their peoples declare:

That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.

May we learn to build the defenses of peace in our own minds and may we advocate that our leaders do the same.

Go in peace. Make peace. Be at peace.

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