

A Unitarian Universalist in the White House?

Rev. Tracy Sprowls

July 23, 2017

All Souls Church, New York City

A lot has changed since last November. Or has it really?

Noam Chomsky, one of the most important thinkers of our time, suggests that a major change in our country, and in the world, began in the 1970s with the onset of the age of neoliberalism. This neoliberal era is defined by several factors: a decreased sense of solidarity and community with an increased individualism; concentrated power in the hands of a wealthy few; a lack of participation in policy creation or decision-making that affects people's lives; and socio-economic policies that have stagnated or declined financial progress for the majority of the population while concentrating wealth in the hands of the few.

The results, as we may have witnessed or felt ourselves, are anger, discontent, and fear. Further, is an up rise of populism and nationalism as we have seen with the election of the 45th President and the various events in Europe and around the world.

And it must be said, this neoliberalism White people have been experiencing for the last few decades has had a much longer history for Black and Brown people and others who have been marginalized in our society, and, again, around the world.

Now I know some people sitting in the pews of this congregation do not think politics and religion should mix. What about the separation of church and state, they ask? Many people might come to church to escape the constant politics that they face on social media and in the twenty-four hours a day news cycle.

Church as sanctuary and escape from the ills of the world is definitely an important function of the church.

However, I see the role of the church as two-fold. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., the role of the church "is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." The Rev Dr. Patrick O'Neill, said it this way:

"What lends the Free Church both constant power and constant challenge, of course, is it's unique placement as that City on the Hill that is always both *part of society* and *prophet to that society*. It has been the nature of our Church and its ministry from time immemorial always to wrestle with a kind of schizoid tendency to shift back and forth between full-blown retreat from the world on the one hand, offering itself as sanctuary and refuge from the world – and full-blown engagement and confrontation with the world on the other hand. The Church as Comforter of our afflictions, haven in our struggles, on the one hand; the Church as Afflicter of our comfort and poker of our conscience; the Church as Righteous Prophet demanding our efforts to mend what is broken in the world;

to heal what is wounded in our communities; to hold gently the sorrows and to address lovingly the pain of those perennially left out on the margins of society;

the hopeless and the helpless; the war-torn and the hungry and the infected of the world.” He goes on to say that there are moral human issues before there are ever social policies and as such we in the church are compelled to speak about them no matter who is made uncomfortable.

So, the role of the church is to comfort and offer hope. It is to guide, to offer light on the spiritual journey. It is to support and nurture, indeed. But it is also to challenge and move us, to nudge us from our zones of comfort; it is to afflict us in such a way that we move to action. The social issues of the day are moral issues that we must address in the sanctuaries of our congregations. And if there is to be freedom, if there is to be justice, if human rights are to be protected and cherished, if the social issues that we care about are to be protected and upheld, then our faith must move from inside our congregations and into the streets, into the offices, into the stores, indeed into the houses that govern. It must move to wherever we live and breathe.

Each of us lives guided by our faith; it cannot be separated out from the rest of our lives. Morality guides our beliefs and positions on social issues. And so, we talk about social issues in here, in our sanctuaries, from our pulpits. Sometimes it feels like politics, particularly if all views are not heard, particularly if we do not all agree. But, discussions of these issues do belong here. They belong here, although hopefully they do not remain here.

Religion is at the center of all our major political issues. We cannot ignore this. We can promote, indeed we must ensure, that no one religion becomes the state religion. We must constantly be diligent about the separation of church and state but still recognize that politicians, too, are guided by faith in their actions.

But what kind of faith? What kind of interpretation of morality do we want representing us in the White House? Perhaps it is time for a Unitarian Universalist in the White House.

In fact, there have been five presidents who have been identified as Unitarian, or who could be considered Unitarian, based on their values, in United States history. And maybe one who was raised as a Unitarian Universalist, President Obama. These five were John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Millard Fillmore, and William Howard Taft. Two of these men, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, have had tremendous impact on the creation of this country. They were led by their moral beliefs, guided in their Unitarian faith, as well as their profound understanding and hopes for a new democracy.

Although, it is not a presidential election year, why not think about what a Unitarian Universalist president might look like?

Theologically, our Unitarian Universalist president might be anywhere on the spectrum from atheist or pagan to Jewish, Buddhist or Christian. A Unitarian Universalist president, having been part of a congregation theologically diverse, would recognize that there is no one path to God.

Being prepared to understand no one path on the spiritual journey is the One and Only path, tolerance, even an embracing of all faith traditions would be evident in our president. Their speeches and actions would embrace our diversity of faith in this nation and recognize that no one religion can claim ownership of a “true faith.” Not only would our Unitarian Universalist president have this understanding of religion but they would be very interested in using this understanding as a guiding policy in domestic and international relations.

An acceptance of all faith traditions as different paths also challenges the notion of God being on the side of the United States. Would our Unitarian Universalist president have the self-righteous notion that God has blessed this country alone? Our president would definitely challenge the paternalistic approach to international relations that is supported by a Christian world view. Instead of a “father knows best” approach, the relationships between countries might shift more to partnerships.

Our Unitarian Universalist president would certainly be guided by our Unitarian Universalist principles. The political agenda would include “equal opportunity, equal education, equal health care, decent housing for everyone, the equal right of every person to marry whomever they love, and the right of every woman to be the sole decider of what happens to her body.” Our civil rights would be protected under a Unitarian Universalist because they would recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

With a Unitarian Universalist president our second principle, justice, equity and compassion for all, would end the special privilege for the few. No longer would the rich get richer on the backs of the middle class and the poor. No longer would the profit margins of the corporations outweigh the basic human rights of the population. No longer would social security or Medicaid be at risk; no longer would tax breaks be given to the richest in the country; no longer would any child truly be left behind—uninsured, poorly educated, hungry, and unprotected.

Our Unitarian Universalist president would uphold the right of conscience when it comes to decision making and not toss around words such as “patriotic” to suggest that because there are those that disagree, they are less devoted to this country than those who blindly follow. They will uphold the use of the democratic process rather than manipulate and try to control it. In fact, our Unitarian Universalist president would ensure that the election process was fair and as accurate as possible. Allegations of tampering with an election from another country would be fully investigated. Obvious miscarriages of justice in the election process would not be rewarded with political office but with heavy fines or community service.

Our Unitarian Universalist president would not ever attempt to undermine the media or the press, and therefore our democracy, with accusations of being fake news. In fact, I think they would wholeheartedly support free speech but also challenge the news organizations, internet sites, social media and radio hosts who purposely mislead voters with inaccurate or misleading news stories. Further, public service messages, free education, extended voting access, and support of the free press would be critical in their administration.

Instead of building an empire, a hegemony, the goal of our Unitarian Universalist president would be that of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. This

would begin with addressing poverty, education, access to resources, and the other needs of those around the world. This would mean taking a look at globalization, unbridled capitalism and consumerism and its effects on other nations. This would mean protecting human rights instead of diminishing them. This would mean looking at global warming and the other ecological devastations brought on by humans.

In addressing these issues of a world community, our Unitarian Universalist president would have respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. There would be recognition by our president that all things are connected and that the policies of one country definitely have an effect on others. We no longer can disregard how our behaviors and our actions affect others. More than this though, would be a return to community, a realization that we are not isolated people in an isolated country. We have a responsibility for and an obligation to each other.

Our Unitarian Universalist president would know from their Universalist heritage that all of humanity, all of creation, is united in one common destiny.

Our Universalists forebears believed all were saved. None were to be divided into factions or excluded from God's love. This is a commitment, then, to radical human equality and the idea that "one's own personal welfare was inseparably linked to the welfare of all humanity." (Paul Razor) In other words, one's own salvation is tied up with everyone else. Our Unitarian Universalist president would show us the way.

Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish economist and sociologist did a study of the United States in which he concluded that, "America has had gifted conservative statesmen and national leaders...But with few exceptions, only the liberals have gone down in history as national heroes."

It is time for a national hero, a liberal in the White House. And when I say liberal, I mean "open-hearted, open-minded and openhanded." Can a Unitarian Universalist bring these things to the White House? I believe so but our political system is set up to preserve the status quo. Any liberal, anyone willing to challenge the old notions and begin again in a new way will not have an easy time of it. But there is always that found in faith, and that is hope.

Amen.