

# Surviving Being Progressive in a Conservative Era

Clay Nelson 16 November 2014

I would have nothing to thank George W. Bush for if it weren't for his re-election. If various unscrupulous Republican tactics had not given Ohio to Bush, I would probably still be living in Sacramento, California. Adopting New Zealand as my home was my response to the U.S. moving further to the right; away from progressive values. After the most recent US election, I am more than convinced that was the right decision. But I am given pause by our most recent election here in New Zealand decisively giving National a third term. I am stymied as I have little inclination to emigrate again having fallen deeply in love with my new country. There are few other places to consider anyway as we are living in a conservative age where the foremost democracies in the world have right of centre governments at the moment. Besides us, it is true in the UK, Canada, Australia, France, and even Norway, to mention a few that might be alternatives. It would appear that my only option is to work here to shift us politically to a more progressive path, trusting that pendulums swing both ways.

While we frequently hear that religion and politics don't mix, it couldn't be further from the truth. Our spiritual path greatly impacts our politics, but some paths lead to the right and some to the left. Certainly the Christian right has been quite effective in pushing their political agenda. But in times past so has the religious left, as during the civil rights movement in the US. I take comfort that my journey finds me surrounded by Unitarian Universalists whose principles all reflect progressive values. However, that does not mean we are furthering them effectively beyond our own community.

This morning I would like to explore how as UUs we can be part of turning back the conservative tide. To do so we need to look more closely at what we face and strategies for expressing our values outside our community.

It is a mystery to me how people who claim to be religious can vote for the right. How can 86% of Kiwis (many of whom identify with a religious faith) believe that child poverty is the number one issue New Zealand faces and then vote overwhelmingly for the party which will do little or nothing about it. It is a blind spot for me, but George Lakoff, a professor of cognitive sciences and linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley is helpful. He points out:

All politics is moral. When politicians' policy prescriptions differ widely, it is because their sense of what is right is very different. In short, they have different moral systems. That is true of progressives and conservatives alike. The political proposals conservatives and progressives make are based on different moral systems.

In addition, progressives and conservatives have very different understandings of democracy. For progressives, empathy is at the centre of the very idea of democracy. Democracy is a governing system in which citizens care about their fellow citizens and work through their government to provide public resources for all. In short, in a democracy, the private depends on the public.

If you have a business it depends on public resources: roads, bridges, sewers, a water supply, ports, airports and air traffic control, a national bank, a patent office, public education for your employees, public health, the electric grid, the satellite communication system, and the internet. You can't run a business without these. Private enterprise depends on the public. The same is true of individuals, who depend on public resources like clean air, clean water, enough to eat, safe food and products, public safety, access to education and health care,

housing, employment – as well as those roads, bridges, sewers, satellite communication, electric grid, and so on. And – most important – voting in free elections, choosing the government to provide those resources. Private life depends on the public.

Every progressive instinctively knows all this, but very few say it. Instead, progressives tend to talk not about such values, but instead about facts, policies, and programmes.

Conservatives, on the other hand, have a very different view of democracy. For them democracy is supposed to provide them with the *liberty* to do what they want, without being responsible for others and without others being responsible for them. For them, there is only personal responsibility, not social responsibility. Indeed, providing public resources is, to a conservative, immoral, taking away personal responsibility, making people dependent, lazy, unable to take care of themselves. Removing public resources is seen as providing incentives, and individual liberty is seen as the condition in which you can carry out your incentives.

This is very much what conservative morality is about. If you cannot succeed through personal responsibility, you deserve what you get.

But these are not just two equally valid, though opposite, moral systems. Because the private really does depend on the public, because personal responsibility without public resources gets you nowhere, the conservative view of democracy has radically false consequences. It is immoral because it lacks empathy, but it is also just plain false.

If Cartesian rationalism were true, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in. If all reason were conscious, and if being human were, by definition, being a rational animal, and if rationality were logic, then the facts would set us all free. But human reason doesn't work that way as I discussed last week.

All thought is physical. We think using the neural systems in our brains. Thought works by frames – neural circuitry that we use to comprehend the world. The sad fact is that we can only understand what our brains allow us to understand. As a result, just pointing out the facts to conservatives cannot work. As I pointed out last week, we all have an amygdala that gives us certainty about what we know but what we know is not based on facts but on emotions.

Our hope lies in what Lakoff calls bi-conceptualism. Most of us are partly conservative and partly progressive – mostly one but partly the other, so far as issues are concerned. There is no ideology of the moderate. Moderate conservatives have some progressive views, and conversely. The circuitry for both moral systems is present in the bi-conceptual brain, applying to different issues.

The more one hears conservative language, the stronger the conservative moral system gets in your brain. The same is true for progressive language. The more progressives speak in their own language, the stronger their frame circuitry gets into the brains of those who hear them, who already have a version of that system.

Lakoff's advice to those of us who are mostly progressive is to say as often as possible that Progressivism supports freedom. The private depends on the public. Moral ideals matter. Authenticity matters.

But saying it isn't enough. Transformation of society to reflect more closely our principles is going to take grassroots organising. The Moses of community organising was Saul Alinsky,

except he came down from the mountain with 12 rules instead of ten. While he died in 1972 his book, *Rules for Radicals*, remains a primer for organising people to change injustice. However, his most lasting contribution was founding the Industrial Areas Foundation or IAF.

In the 1940s, Alinsky organised the old Chicago stockyards neighborhood made famous in Upton Sinclair's classic muckraking work, *The Jungle*. There, he recruited and guided indigenous leaders who were divided by ethnicity, religion, and political philosophy into a large organisation, the Back of The Yards Neighborhood Council.

The Council, like the handful of other large-scale organisations Alinsky set up in predominantly black communities in the late '50s and '60s, was in part a pressure group, demanding and negotiating with public and private sector institutions on bread and butter issues like better schools and more jobs, and in part a self-help operation that established credit unions, built or rehabbed housing and provided social services.

As important as these functions were, the greater significance of Alinsky's voluntary community organisations is that they provided a connection between the individual and the larger society.

The modern IAF has changed the focus to bring together community organisations that seek the power necessary to make change. It begins with faith communities which it links to unions and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). It was the IAF that in 1994 brought these groups together to pass the first Living Wage law in Baltimore.

Their model is being followed by the Living Wage Movement Aotearoa New Zealand and why I am pleased this congregation voted to be a member of the movement. We join not only with a number of unions and NGOs, but with the Social Justice arms of both the Catholic and Anglican diocese, the Quakers, and Methodists in working to educate and encourage political and business decision-makers as to the moral imperative and practical benefits of instituting a Living Wage. The movement only got started in early 2013 and already there have been a significant number of accomplishments attesting to the effectiveness of this kind of organising.

The most important tool the IAF teaches is the concept of relational power. Unilateral power is about power over others. This is the power that corrupts and only has short term gains. Relational power is power with others. It is shared power. It is the power that keeps democracy functioning. Properly exercised relational power crosses races, religions, ages, ideologies, and parochial organisational boundaries searching for common ground. Relational power allows formerly antagonistic parties to find common purpose to seek a common good. Those seeking relational power have no permanent allies or enemies. Coalitions form around a common desire to challenge a particular injustice.

Achieving relational power begins with one-to-one conversations with possible coalition partners. It requires listening, empathy, thoughtfulness and ritual. These are the glue that connects any organisation but especially a faith community.

By listening it is more than hearing, it is letting the other person know that they are heard. It is using one's whole body to understand where others are—what they think and worry about, who they care about and fear, what they think of themselves, what they really value, what fuels their anger. We can be hindered in discovering the answers to those questions by worrying more about the task at hand, personal insecurity or not really caring. Our own needs can drown out the clear sounds of the other. If our minds are cluttered with ourselves, wondering how we are coming across, wondering what to say or ask next, wondering how they can help our congregation, we have no chance of really understanding the other and expressing care.

Closely related to listening is empathy. The word derives from a Greek word meaning affection or passion. It is the projection of one's personality into the personality of another in order to understand him or her better. It is crossing boundaries of race, religion, age, sex or family history to stand in another's shoes.

Empathy is active. It involves asking questions, reading, intuiting, testing. It means we have to know people's stories and also know how their stories fit into the bigger story of their race, their country, their region, the economy, their religion. The purpose is to honour the particularity of each person's story that we can make sense of the bigger forces around us, both in the past and present, that we can act with one another to create a new history by what we do to change the present.

Empathy in action is thoughtfulness. It manifests itself in small things. Here it is the bringing flowers for the chalice table or bringing finger sandwiches for morning tea or spending time with a visitor or a multitude of other things to make the morning a positive event for all. Ultimately it is paying attention and being considerate of others. Taking care to calculate the implications of what we do on others. The greatest acts of love show up as thoughtfulness. It is the action plan for our first principle and it builds strong organisations, unleashes talent and energy, and sustains participation in ways just agreeing to our seven principles can't.

Ritual is the fourth ingredient necessary for relational power. In a religious organisation it comes with the territory. The purpose of ritual is to transcend the present. It connects past, present, and future. It recognises we are creatures of many senses and offers something for each sense. It allows many different people to connect in a shared event with a central meaning, and yet it has as many individual meanings as there are people. It offers regular reminder of what the world could be like and we are part of that vision.

Relational power is the soft way of organising to change the world. It builds up individual organisations and connects them to others with a shared vision. When an organisation faces problems like money, adding members, and building a wider and deeper leadership base it is good to ask questions like: How are we treating the members we already have? Are we at the centre of their interests? Are we helping them build a relational culture? Have we imbued them with our rituals? Do we know members' stories? How many people have their story at stake in our stated vision? What are we doing with the leaders we have? Are they challenged, engaged, growing? Are they appreciated? Do they have clear responsibility and support to be successful?

Practising relational power day in and day out builds unbreakable bonds between people, creating organisational sinew—strong and flexible enough not to break under stress and pressure. We will need that in the years ahead as we seek to move the pendulum in a progressive direction.