



Loving your political opponent—Creative Conflict

Clay Nelson © 26 March 2017

In this Age of Trump, for many of us, loving our political opponents seems a step too far. Friends in the US report political differences in their families and life-long friendships are fracturing them, some seemingly beyond repair. This goes way beyond “unfriending” them on Facebook. Marriages are dissolving. Children and parents are estranged. Communities are divided. Political debate has always been a blood sport in the US, but this level of carnage is beyond my experience.

We may feel safe in New Zealand, but Trump has his supporters and detractors here as well. The values he espouses are normalising nativist, racist, misogynist, authoritarian attitudes globally, creating conflict. Kiwis in my experience don’t have the same political blood lust of my fellow Americans, preferring to deflect discussion with a “That’s interesting” response to political opinions they consider rubbish.

We may feel safe, but we should be wary. What I consider the Trump virus seems to be spreading; for example, instances of hate crimes are being committed here with greater frequency not unlike in the US. We have an election coming up. It will be “interesting” to see if the political discord and polarisation being experienced in the US leaks into our political processes.

My intention this morning is to encourage us as Unitarians to stay a step ahead of similar polarisation by practising how to love our political opponents within our own community. In other words, how can we engage in creative conflict that doesn’t result in estrangement or the dissolution of relationships? Perhaps then we can carry what we learn beyond these walls to our families, our workplace; our community. We already have an issue that divides some of us. Some express to me a concern that the congregation, and in particular, if not specifically me, is too political. There is a desire expressed by some that I speak more about “spiritual” matters.

I confess confusion about what that request really means, as I consider all of my sermons to be first and foremost about spiritual matters. To separate religion from politics renders religion irrelevant and politics lethal. Every one of our seven principles is a political statement, a paradigm of our values and beliefs. And yet, nothing is more spiritual than our values and beliefs.

I would note that all religions live out their faith in the political sphere. Abortion, climate change, same-sex marriage, immigration, religious instruction in schools, social welfare, economic inequality and many other political issues have religious groups that support or oppose them as tenets of their faith. I find it frightening that the fastest growing segment of Christianity, independent charismatic churches, are not interested in growing their congregations or proselytising, but in advancing like-minded followers to the top of every sector of society. In this manner they intend to transform society to fit their very conservative theology, which is antithetical to our

vision of a just, compassionate, sustainable and democratic world. Their success is seen in Trump's appointing their supporters to numerous cabinet posts. We have several of these charismatic churches in New Zealand committed to the same goal. I would suggest that for us to remove ourselves from the political realm, even if it was possible, would be to surrender the theological high ground in the public square to those who oppose everything for which we stand. Our presence is required.

I do understand why we are uncomfortable with politics and religion and why good company avoids the topics around the dinner table. They can and often do lead to disagreement, discomfort, disaffection and indigestion. Most of us prefer to avoid conflict even if we choose to engage with those we disagree. For most of us our default position is to move to the shadows and remain silent.

In my 35 years leading churches I have been repeatedly reminded that being part of a faith community is not a dinner party. This has been particularly true in the three Unitarian congregations I have served.

As Unitarians, our tradition calls us to be prophetic. That doesn't mean we predict the future, but that we speak our truth to power. We affirm that theology is practice; service is its prayer. Our religion is social action. We stand for, work for, vote for—justice, equity and compassion. And the practical application of our faith is often expressed in our practice of politics.

Legendary Unitarian minister and pacifist John Haynes Holmes climbed into his pulpit on the eve of World War I, knowing that he could lose his livelihood, knowing he was jeopardizing all he'd ever worked for. In the politics of the time, his views were considered treasonous. He delivered a fiery sermon, denouncing this and all war, as anti-Christian, and instead of a call for arms, he called for alms; reconciliation; brotherhood.

The congregation responded with stunned silence. And Holmes left the pulpit for what he expected would be the last time. The board president called an emergency meeting.

The church board took two votes that evening. First, they unanimously condemned their minister's pacifism, declaring it to be dangerous, 'wrong-headed,' even treasonous. Second, they voted unanimously that, wrong-headed or not, John Haynes Holmes had an obligation to speak his mind. As Unitarians, they held dear our continuing tradition for right of conscience as expressed in our practice of freedom of the pulpit, a freedom that denies and defeats any possibility of succumbing to the tyranny of the majority; a freedom that recognises a single dissenting voice as vital to the democratic process of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Personally, I applaud both Holmes and his board: Holmes, for refusing to conform to external pressures and speaking his truth and the board for supporting his refusal to conform, in spite of rejecting his message.

There is one surprising aspect of this story. Being a liberal religion theologically does not mean Unitarians have always been a liberal one politically. In America, they were part and parcel of the Establishment at this time. They supported Prohibition, condemned pacifism, and at one time argued for eugenics, a racist policy to improve the hereditary characteristics of the population by controlling breeding. Here in New

Zealand, in this congregation, we had many supporters of the Great War. Later, many protested Assistant Minister James Chapell's stance supporting Communism.

It really wasn't until the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements that Unitarian politics moved leftward. But even today we are not homogeneous in our politics. To be a Unitarian does not require passing a political litmus test. Nor would it be desirable. We lose our highly valued diversity, if we do not welcome and respect those of opposing political views. We are not an extension of left-of-centre political parties. At our best we are prophets of the spirit. We are not a movement, for movements die. Religions, if they speak life-saving truth, live on. Religion points the way to the next social movement and provides nourishment for the struggle, but the movements and religion are not one and the same.

Doing sound theology is what separates religion from movements. Theology is how we come to discover our notion of what is of ultimate value. It is perhaps the most spiritual thing we can do, for it leads us to discover who we are, what our purpose is, and how we are to act. But we can't discover that alone. We need community to do theology. Beloved Community requires humility, gratitude, praise, nurture, and surrender to something greater than ourselves. If we connect deeply in a diverse community, we discover the beauty of what we can do. Only then can we evoke the most accurate rendering of the truth.

But rendering the truth can be a messy, noisy business.

The key to learning to love our opponents—political and otherwise—lies in distinguishing our differences. Perhaps, that sounds counter-intuitive. The usual approach to learning to get along with one another is by oversimplifying our similarities and ignoring our differences, as we declare ourselves one big happy family that will live tolerantly ever after...right?

Except it doesn't work that way. Instead, we easily see the destination we have in common, but when we disagree on how to get there, we feel mystified, even betrayed, at how "mistaken" our new friend can be, because they seemed so...intelligent, and if they just weren't so stubborn, or misinformed, or selfish, then they would see the light and we could get back to agreeing about how right I am.

This cycle of events is repeated over and over again in heated family disagreements, and neighbourhood circles, and at morning tea. The failure to distinguish our divisions asks for inappropriate compromise. It tempts us to set aside differences instead of engaging them. We stand to learn far more from one another in investigating the boundaries of our differences, than had we tried to design each and every meeting, every initiative, or every worship service as "one size fits all." And such weak-kneed spirituality will lull our souls to sleep.

When we encounter our perceived opponents, and take the opportunity to engage with our differences, either in the world or within the walls of this church, our cherished assumptions are challenged. Divulging our differences requires that we better articulate our positions, and forces us to consider creative options we cannot see when we take a stand, only to face a mirror. Diversity enriches us by increasing our effectiveness in problem solving by widening our field of vision.

My vision of a healthy Unitarian congregation that welcomes creative conflict requires understanding what the word religion means. It means to bind together. It is the covenant we read each Sunday that binds us together. It means when we disagree, we stay at the table and discuss our differences, trusting our mutual assent to that covenant.

In that healthy, covenant relationship we never forget that Unitarianism is never about just you or me. Our religious community is not a collection of walled-off, isolated beings in their bubbles bumping into one another. It is about transforming ourselves. That means popping that bubble so we connect intimately, honestly, openly in an attitude that assumes we never have the final answer. And even then, we engage one another with integrity, respect and love.

Finally we recognise that justice work without deep theology is shallow and dies easily. Faith sustains and nourishes justice. Justice enables faith. As the prophet Micah says, “ Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God,” (preferably in that order).