

Electing a UU President

Rev. Paul Sprecher

Second Parish in Hingham, www.secondparish.org

January 4, 2009

Over the past sixty years, two politicians from our ranks have run for president: Adlai Stevenson, Unitarian, who ran in 1952 and 1956, prior to the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists in 1961, and Mike Gravel, Unitarian Universalist, who ran in the election of 2008 first as a Democrat and later as a Libertarian.

Adlai Stevenson was famously scorned as too much of an intellectual to run successfully; one supporter at a rally shouted out enthusiastically, “You’ll have the votes of every thinking person in America.” Stevenson replied sardonically, “That’s not enough; I’ll need a majority.” Religion was hardly an issue in his campaigns against Dwight David Eisenhower, who himself was raised in a household of Jehovah’s Witnesses and was baptized a Presbyterian only after he assumed the presidency.

Gravel’s failure as a candidate also had little to do with his religion – I’m not sure the fact that he’s a Unitarian Universalist was widely known; rather, his political positions were somewhat odd and his campaign never caught hold. To his credit, though, I would point out his valuable service in exposing the Pentagon Papers in 1971 in order to undermine misleading information spread by the Nixon administration about the Vietnam War; the definitive edition of the papers was published by Beacon Press, the denominational press of the Unitarian Universalist

Association, despite vociferous threats from the administration, up to and including President Nixon, who claimed he would freeze all the bank accounts of the Association and essentially drive it to bankruptcy. Gravel's latest appearance on the national stage lacked gravitas, but his earlier service had grandeur and courage about it.

My task this morning, as assigned to me by the highest bidder for a sermon topic at our service auction last fall, is to consider this question: Now that an African American has been elected to the presidency, now that the racial barrier has fallen, what would it take to elect a Unitarian Universalist – someone who did not claim to be a Bible-believing Christian?

I've already suggested in this morning's reading from Revolutionary Spirits, Gary Kowalski's book about the Founding Fathers, that religious tolerance was built into the fabric of our nation's Declaration of Independence and Constitution.¹ Intolerance and bigotry have sometimes prevailed in our history, including in the recent past, but always there have been those, like John Quincy Adams, like Martin Luther King, Jr., or like Harvey Milk, who pointed back to the Declaration and reminded us that "All men are created equal." We have adopted as our first Unitarian Universalist principal a more inclusive variant of the same theme when we pledge to affirm and promote "The inherent worth and dignity of every person." For us, tolerance of diversity is built into our religious faith. It is those who are intolerant of the faith of others who are outside the mainstream of

American thought. So this is not so much a political as a religious discussion. Politics inevitably disappoints because compromises are required in the real world to achieve results. It is the task of our faith to constantly call us back to higher purposes than can be achieved in politics; to remind us that there is always more equity to be gained, more dignity to be honored, more compassion to be embodied. From another religious tradition, Brad Hirschfield describes this idea in his book You Don't Have to Be Wrong for Me to Be Right: Finding Faith Without Fanaticism: "If religion and spirit don't make you idealistic, what's the point? Idealism recognizes the difference between how things are and how they could be, and it expects us to get to that better place."²

At the same time, our faith calls us to reach out to others who do not share our particular faith commitments, to find common ground so that we can create a place for living together peacefully, so that we can do our part to achieve the peaceable kingdom long imagined by prophets and dreamers, worked toward over generations. Jesus said that "In my Father's house are many mansions." I believe his meaning was that his followers would not be the only ones occupying mansions.

One of the important ways in which tolerance has spread in this country is simply through acquaintance. When we find ourselves as strangers among members of another race or religion or ethnic group or sexual orientation, we tend to pick out the differences we have from them – in language, clothing, behavior,

foods, and so on. As our schoolrooms, workplaces and neighborhoods have become increasingly diverse, we have come to know each other more as individuals than as representatives of our groups of origin or of choice. The Civil Rights Movement made the election of Barack Obama possible on many levels, not least by opening the door for blacks and whites to become acquainted with each other as individuals rather than as representatives of their respective races, thereby illustrating over and over again that we are all more fundamentally human than otherwise. The willingness of gay Americans to come out of the closet and demonstrate that being gay is one more variant in the diversity of our human nature has done more than anything else to reduce bias and discrimination against those of different sexual orientations. We see that our children are more tolerant of diversity in all its forms and expressions in part because they have been raised in an era when they have had the opportunity to become acquainted with more diversity in their schools and daily lives than have their elders.

One of the most important experiences for me in becoming comfortable with Muslim Americans happened after 9/11 when the Muslim community in Ridgewood, NJ, joined together with the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood to sponsor a public forum in support of the civil rights of all in the aftermath of that terrible tragedy. At the time, over 1,000 Muslim suspects were incarcerated without charge at a nearby INS facility in Elizabeth, NJ, and Muslim children were being harassed as they walked to school; the girls were castigated if they wore a

headdress, a hajib, as a symbol of their faith in school. Unitarian Universalists volunteered to accompany the children to ensure that they would be safe and free from interference as they carried out their normal lives. The Muslim community in America had just begun to become politically active in the election of 2000, and they had thrown their lot as a whole with the Republican party, because they had received assurances of support from the Bush campaign and felt more comfortable with the social conservatism of the Republican platform. After 9/11, though, they found that more fundamental issues were primary – issues of tolerance for their religion and ethnic background, the right of habeas corpus, the right not to be incarcerated without just cause. We Unitarian Universalists of Ridgewood, many of whom were self-declared atheists or agnostics, gathered with our Muslim friends in solidarity as we broke the fast of Ramadan together, exchanged religious viewpoints and became friends united by a deeper level of connection as human beings, each becoming more complete as our own horizons were broadened.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published a survey last June which suggested that the majority of Americans take an expansive view of what religious commitments, if any, it takes to get to heaven – which we can take as a proxy for what it requires to lead a good life. In figures to warm any Universalist’s heart, the poll reported that 70% of Americans believe that “religions other than theirs could lead to eternal life.”³ The result was controversial, because Evangelical Christians couldn’t believe that people had understood the question properly, so the Pew

Forum asked the question again, this time specifying specific religions; again, 65% of respondents said they believed that other religions – all other religions, including atheism – could lead to eternal life. Now, as the author of the article puts it, atheists would probably have to be dragged to heaven kicking and screaming, but over 40% of all respondents said that atheists could get to heaven. Now of course, this is precisely what Universalists have been teaching for over 200 years: that God is Love, not a vengeful deity who is particularly interested in imposing suffering on anyone who doesn't toe the line. But given the extraordinary political power that the Religious Right has acquired over the past quarter-century, it is remarkable that, as at the time of the Founding Fathers, the American people as a whole remain suspicious of religious organizations which try to put them into a straight-jacket of belief or behavior.

Another Pew study shows that Congress is becoming increasingly diverse, with about half of the members being Protestant, 30% Catholic, 8% Jewish, two Buddhists (for the first time ever), two Muslims and at least one Unitarian Universalist. Underrepresented are the 16% of Americans who claim no religious affiliation at all; only 5 members of Congress – less than 1% – did not specify a religious affiliation.⁴ Nevertheless, not being a member of a mainline Christian denomination is clearly no bar to office at the Congressional level.

In fact, a view which says that the religious landscape in America is monolithic and fundamentalist at its core is an illusion. Barack Obama's mother was an

atheist, his father a Muslim, and his grandparents were Unitarian Universalists. Her memorial service, which he and his family attended during their recent vacation in Hawaii, was held at the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu. Obama and his family have been affiliated with our theological cousins in the United Church of Christ. This leads my colleague Rev. James Ford, Minister of the First Unitarian Church of Providence, to the following reflections:

[For all the ballyhoo about how Barack Obama wasn't really born in Hawaii,] there hasn't been a lot of ranting about Obama's UU connection.

But at least there really is a UU connection.

It was the religion of his maternal grandparents and presumably the faith within which his mother was raised and the church he attended at least on occasion during his childhood.

And this means things. It does seem many of his values came to him through his maternal grandmother. And her faith was Unitarian Universalism.

What, however, this actually might mean, and how it plays out, well, only time will tell.

But somehow I find it heartening...⁵

So far we've established that Unitarians have already occupied the White House far more often than our numbers might justify; something like 12% of our presidents so far have been Unitarians. Of course, most of them would have self-identified as Liberal Christians, not as atheists or non-Christians, so that particular religious quarrel never got fought out. But ironically the election of 1800 between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson featured some of the most bitter religious

conflicts seen in presidential elections, with Adams denounced as a representative of the established churches of New England and Jefferson as a freethinking atheist who would destroy all the Bibles in the land when he entered the White House.

Looking back, we religious liberals lay claim to both of them as Unitarians despite what seemed to their contemporaries a vast difference in their religious beliefs.

We've established that the founders were responding to a religiously diverse society much like ours, including both churched and unchurched, Christian and non-Christian, and that they established a tolerant political order which has served us well so far by acknowledging what is best in each person regardless of origins, background, or religious choices. A majority of Americans today believe that it is possible to live a good life – be a decent human being and even go to heaven – regardless of religion or even lack of religion. What matters are deeds, not creeds, behavior rather than belief. All of this is familiar to us as Unitarian Universalists; indeed, it is very much what we are and have been about for generations.

But to return to the specific assignment: What would it take for a Unitarian Universalist to be elected President of the United States today? I believe the answer is the same for a Unitarian Universalist as it would be for any other politician. First, there would need to be a call to return to our first principles as a nation, to tolerance of diversity, to what we UUs refer to as respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all persons. In truth, Obama's victory speech in Grant Park sounded some of these same themes:

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.... It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled - Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been a collection of Red States and Blue States: we are, and always will be, the United States of America.⁶

Part of the task is to elevate the level of our political discourse by speaking in ways which address everyone rather than attempting to gain narrow political advantage by dividing some against others. That age of divisiveness has had its day; Americans have shown that they're ready to move on. It's also important for Unitarian Universalists to be able to use and to hear religious language which might not be their own without wincing; just as there are many colors of skin and tones of speech, there are many ways of expressing religious conviction; all deserve our respect.

Second, there would need to be a program which spoke to the needs of the nation and its people. Such a program would speak, as our founders did, of creating a commonwealth for the common good. I emphasize again that this is not a political issue but a religious one; the way we live and act in this world is fundamental to who we are as religious people.

Finally, there would need to be a person who embodied such a commitment to the public good with integrity and with the ability to create broad coalitions to

achieve the greater good for the nation as a whole. Such a person would need to embody strength of character and to have the good fortune to come to the attention of the American people when his or her skills, character and vision were most needed.

In other words, what it takes to elect a Unitarian Universalist president is what it takes us to live faithfully each day: living out our principles in our lives; talking with others in ways which open ears and mouths rather than closing them; caring for each other and our earth; applying intelligence and wisdom to the problems and opportunities we face. It would also help for us to identify ourselves as Unitarian Universalists when we speak to others, and to tell how our faith informs our lives. When we live well, we show up intolerance and bigotry for what it is, and we open the way for a better life for all.

Amen.

www.secondparish.org

¹ Gary Kowalski, Revolutionary Spirits: The Enlightened Faith of America's Founding Fathers, New York: BlueBridge, 2008, pp. 2-10.

² Quoted by Peter W. Marty, "Big Enough God," Christian Century, Jan 13, 2009, p. 43.

³ Charles M. Blow, "Heaven for the Godless," New York Times, Dec. 27, 2008, p. A19.

⁴ Brian C. Mooney, "Pew study: New Congress is religiously diverse," The Boston Globe, Dec. 19, 2008, http://www.boston.com/news/politics/politicalintelligence/2008/12/pew_study_new_c.html

⁵ James Ford, "Idle Thoughts About Barack Obama & Unitarian Universalism," Jan 3, 2009,

⁶ Remarks of President-Elect Barack Obama : Election Night, Chicago, IL, November 04, 2008, http://www.barackobama.com/2008/11/04/remarks_of_presidenelect_bar.php