

The Election Sermon
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
November 6, 2016

*“This is the mission of our faith:
To teach the fragile art of hospitality;
To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;
To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;
And to witness to all, that we must hold the whole world in our hands.”*
Rev. William F. Schulz
former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association

Readings

from the “Oration” spoken by Solomon Lincoln here in our Old Ship Meeting House in 1885 on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the Town of Hingham:

One... secret of permanent influence and strength, and of a sound public spirit, has always been recognized. The town has listened to the counsels of its best citizens, has employed them in its service, and has conferred its honors upon them. They, on the other hand, have devoted their best efforts to her interests. This was conspicuously true of its early history. Nevertheless, it was no more true in the days of Peter Hobart than it is today, that those names which the memory most readily preserves as leaders in the town were those fittest to lead, and those who have made its name familiar abroad have first become conspicuous at home. We hear much in these days about the failure of the best citizens to take part in public affairs. Complaint is made that they are critics of, not actors in public life. The greater fault is with the people themselves who refuse to call such to their service. Men of worth are men of self-respect. The people must itself select its leaders. Those are not fit to lead who select themselves. The public service is the highest service. The government of men is the most difficult work set for men to do. No ability is too great for it; no experience too wide... Public office is not best filled by men who resort to it for a livelihood which they cannot earn in competition with their fellows.

words of Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Harry Meserve (hymnbook No. 496):

From arrogance, pompousness, and from thinking ourselves more important than we are, may some saving sense of humor liberate us. For allowing ourselves to ridicule the faith of others, may we be forgiven. For making war and calling it peace, special privilege and calling it justice, indifference and calling it tolerance, pollution and calling it progress, may we be cured. For telling ourselves and others that evil is inevitable while good is impossible, may we stand corrected. God of our mixed up, tragic, aspiring, doubting, and insurgent lives, help us to be as good as in our hearts we have always wanted to be. Amen.

Sermon

Do we really believe we human beings, and each one of us, were created by this incomprehensibly huge universe just so we could get stuff and be comfortable in our individual small lives? Do we believe that fifteen billion years of cosmic evolution and millions of years of biological evolution were all to the end that we could fritter away all too much of our time in trivial or self-centered pursuits, and along the way damage, perhaps irrevocably, the living earth systems that sustain our lives and all life?

There *are* other ways of understanding who and where we are. Some of these ways are quite old indeed; as old for example as the first peoples who lived on this land we now call the United States.

Vine Deloria, Jr., who was a member of the Standing Rock Sioux nation, wrote a great deal about these old ways. He died in 2005, but left behind twenty books and many essays relating to Native American beliefs and issues of social justice; he left as well his personal legacy of activism on behalf of the rights of native peoples.

In one of his essays (“If You Think About it, You Will See that it is True”) Deloria wrote:

The real interest of the old Indians was not to discover the abstract structure of physical reality but rather to find the proper road along which, for the duration of a person’s life, individuals were supposed to walk. This colorful image of the road suggests that the universe is a moral universe.

“A moral universe.”

In the same essay Deloria wrote of the Indian assumption (this of course long before the western scientific Gaia hypothesis) that the earth herself and everything that is part of the earth is alive.

In this spirit, elsewhere (in “The Religious Challenge”) Deloria wrote that yes, the allegiance of many Americans “is to democracy, a powerful idea, but it has no relationship to the earth upon which we walk and the plants and animals that give us sustenance.” He then asks what *we* must still ask: “Do we continue to exploit the earth, or do we preserve it and preserve life?”

This is, not at all incidentally, the question that underlies the current protests at the Standing Rock Sioux Nation, Deloria’s tribal nation.

For weeks now members of the Standing Rock Sioux, along with hundreds of people from other tribal nations across the country, as well as non-Native allies – including this past week many religious leaders, Unitarian Universalists among them, Rev. Peter Morales, the president of our Unitarian Universalist Association, among them... have been camped out on and near Sioux land, sacred land, to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline, to protest in particular its routing under the Missouri River, which in the case of a leak would threaten the water supply for the Sioux Nation and beyond.

Many have been arrested in the midst of almost entirely non-violent peaceful protests.

And President Obama just the other day said that the Army Corps of Engineers needs to consider re-routing and that native lands and rights must be respected. But the work on the pipeline continues. The protests continue.

A current member of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation, herself a grandmother, says the following, speaking of those out protesting:

When I was young I was out there, but today I'm old, so now I sit at my fire. Me, I don't go out there no more, but if I have to I will.

We don't own this land. Nobody owns Grandmother. We're just here to take care of Grandmother.

We're connected with the stars... with the animals... we're connected to the earth.

We are caretakers of this land. We're the ones that knew how to live on this earth, and knew how to take care of it.

But these people are out to kill the whole world...

Look at the weather. They destroyed our weather, they just destroyed everything. Today all they live for is how much money they can get, how life could be easy till they die. They're not worrying about how their kids are gonna survive in the future.

There's a day coming and it's coming soon. When you're gonna have to stand up and speak for yourself.

Let's take our world back. Let's take our Grandmother back, heal her as much as we can for our future generations.

Me, it's sad, I cry.

You know... I come from here, and when I die I'm gonna go back to this earth.

Why can't you just respect my Grandmother, you know? Respect my ways, you know? Your ways don't work.

These deeply personal and moving words echoing Vine Deloria's question which must be our question: Will we continue to exploit life or will we live and work to preserve life?

Why am I talking about all this in this old New England tradition of "The Election Sermon"?

Quite simply to point out that we (meaning the media, meaning the candidates, meaning most of us most of the time) while often talking about much that matters: from issues of character and temperament to immigration to racism to terrorism, war and peace, and sometimes even income equality and poverty... we have mostly been leaving out of our national debate, even leaving out of most of our conversations closer to home that which is the most important matter of all, which is the context that holds all these other issues and challenges. The context, in the form of questions:

How will we live on our earth home?

How will we live in relationship with each other on our earth home?

How will we live in relationship nation to nation, people to people?

How will we live in relationship to the earth, to all living beings?

Why, to what purpose, are we here?

We must ask such questions, because we have heretofore gotten so much backwards:

Economic growth – usually understood to mean making and consuming ever more stuff – is assumed to be the only way to ensure the flourishing of our human lives, even though this kind of growth depends on ever more exploitation of limited resources of every kind.

The continuing need for ever more energy derived from fossil fuels is assumed to be essential to this so-called growth and to human survival into the indefinite future, with only a nod at best to making the transition to a clean energy economy and way of life, oh sometime in the next twenty or fifty years... for as important as the Paris climate change treaty is, it may be far too late unless much more is done to avoid the most devastating effects of global warming and climate change.

A strong U.S. military with a global reach (some would say overreach), thousands of bases in all corners of the globe, is assumed to be the only way to safeguard the security and comfort of Americans and of the world.

We have heretofore gotten so much backwards and upside down.

So the presence of Indians and their allies from across the country at Standing Rock is witness to another way, is posing the right questions in the right order. Among other things, this presence, this protest, lifts up our urgent need for an alternative vision or certainly a richer and deeper vision of what American democracy could and should be:

A democracy which continues to reach toward the vision of freedom and justice and equal rights for all; a democracy which does not privilege the wealthy or corporate power over individual so-called ordinary citizens; a democracy in which the words “of the people, by the people, and for the people” are truly inclusive of all people, regardless of color or background, rich or poor, women and men, no matter who or how you love, and in which the word “people” also includes all living beings and this living earth of which we are only a part – and latecomers at that. As Vine Deloria also wrote (in the same essay from which I first quoted):

Unlike Western religion and philosophy... the fact that humankind had been the final product of the purposeful life force did not make them the crown of creation. Coming last, human beings were the “younger brothers” of the other life-forms and therefore had to learn everything from these creatures.

He was naming an essential humility, essential if we want to help human life and all life to flourish in our nation and on this good earth.

So... the campaign speech I wish I'd heard this fall would have named much more forcefully and frequently what are truly the most important and pressing challenges we face in our nation and on the planet, challenges to which I've already alluded: from climate change to military overreach, to issues of justice and equality. And in the best of worlds, not to mention the best of campaigns, it would all grounded in this fresh yet at the same time ancient understanding of the living systems of which we are a part and that sustain the flourishing of human life and all life; which would mean grounded as well in an understanding of the nature of true wealth, not to be measured in dollars and bank accounts and stock portfolios, but in health and community and kindness.

Instead we've had the campaign we've had.

Now... I want to note a glimmer of marginally hopeful news about this campaign. During the campaign, as in many campaigns – though on steroids in this one – we’ve seen the human need to feel part of something larger than our individual isolated selves... though channeled in sometimes frightening, even dangerous ways. Yet this desire, even need, to feel part of something big and meaningful is utterly human, understandable, normal. *How* we channel that need is another matter.

The issues before us are real. But we must find healthy, life-affirming ways of addressing the issues, and that address as well the feelings many in our nation have of being left out, the ground shaking beneath their feet.

We human beings do need a larger sense of purpose in our lives, but in this “moral universe” the sense of purpose we desperately need (know it or not) is one that can unite rather than divide, one that leaves no one behind... a moral purpose bigger than a baseball team, bigger than a political party, even (maybe especially) bigger than a nation.

So, how about serving life, as our Old Ship Covenant puts it?

Serving life, in the spirit of our first UU Principle affirming the worth and dignity of every person and the spirit of our seventh Principle affirming respect for the interdependent web of life, along with other principles affirming our quest for peace and justice.

Serving life in the spirit of that grandmother at Standing Rock, for whom life means not one or another form of life only, but all life, the life that we humans are, along with the life of all the creatures with whom our lives are intertwined, along with the living earth herself who sustains us and enables us to flourish... as long as we do our part.

Those gathered at Standing Rock really know this: know that we *are* part of something bigger than the money-making, war-making economy, that we are part of life, part of the earth, part of the universe, cosmos; and know that it is time to live as if we knew it, past time to learn to serve the “team” of life, because we all wear the uniform of that team, namely our human skin.

In this spirit, then, maybe if the “teams” of our political parties and even our nation began really to be about serving life in its fullness, maybe then, echoing Hingham’s Solomon Lincoln from over a century ago, the best citizens would be more likely to “take part in public affairs.”

Yet not waiting for “then”, may we right now, echoing my colleague Harry Meserve, realize that evil is not inevitable, good is possible, and we can, each of us and more and more of us together, “be as good as in our hearts we have always wanted to be.”

And this, no matter how the election turns out on Tuesday.

Amen.

So may it be.