

Election 2004 Recovery Sermon
In Favor of Liberal Religion
November 7, 2004

I was scheduled to deliver a sermon today on faith and reason, and while this is a very worthy subject, I'm going to post-pone it. I knew the outcome of the election would influence what I talk about today, and there are so many directions I could go. I don't want to make the assumption that everyone here this morning voted for John Kerry. I mean, maybe we all did, but I'm convinced that one thing we need to think about is how divided the country is, and how rallying to one side is just not what we need right now.

In fact, I'm going to springboard this sermon with a quotation that someone told me George Bush used in his victory speech. I don't know who originally said this, but apparently George Bush's speech writer included something to the effect of, "Let us not ask for tasks that are equal to our talents, but let us ask for talents that are equal to our tasks."

I hated to admit it, but it did remind me of John Kennedy's famous quotation, "Ask not what our country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country." I also hate to admit that my pride and my ego feel wounded right now, as a liberal democrat. As a full-blooded American, I like to win! But the other side of that coin is that, when I lose, I know I have to get back on the horse. One of my most prized values is to 'never give up.'

The point is that this is no time to fall into a collective state of self-pity. We do need to be pragmatic, and recognize which attitudes are useful to us, and which are not. As angry as we may feel, the truth is we have to make it a productive kind of anger, and not an energy-sapping, self-destructive kind of anger. Anger is not a bad thing; it can serve the very important purpose of motivating us to change.

I think Jesus was a very angry person - it is a very human emotion he felt, feeling disgusted by what he saw happening around him. But he didn't focus on soothing himself as much as using his strong emotions to challenge the world to change. We can do this, too.

I have a friend from college living in Chicago, named Alex, who worked very hard on the Kerry campaign. He organized a fund-raiser that raised tens of thousands of dollars, and went door to door in Wisconsin. I truly admire the people who worked so hard on the campaign - they have an energy for this stuff that I am not called to. Even though we lost, I feel indebted to them. And as a religious leader, in fact I am indebted to them, because I've got my work cut out for me.

On Wednesday morning Alex called me and the first words out of his mouth were, "I have a proposition for you. I am convinced that this election was won by the conservative churches. So it is only in the churches that the next election can be won." He said, "Are you with me, Hannah, are you ready to take on the Christian right by agency of the liberal

church!?" I was impressed with how well he zeroed in on what is both the problem and the solution.

I was telling my mother that losing this election makes my job much harder and she disagreed with me. She said no, your mission is even clearer now, and she's right. Thankfully, I am not alone - I have all of you to help me. And I have colleagues. I want to assure you that all of us - we liberal ministers - have a sharper sense of purpose now, and the spirit of transforming crisis into opportunity is high among us. Today I hope to convince you, too, that as religious liberals there is great opportunity before you as well.

I received a wonderful article in my email written by an especially forward-thinking UU minister, the Rev. Jake Merrill in Oak Ridge, TN. He articulates very well where the Democrats went wrong, and outlines in very simple terms what the tasks of the liberal church are.

But before I get into that, I want to say from my own point of view, that what seems most obvious and has been long before this election, is that the liberal church has a great need to fill. The UUs I talk to who have been going to the church for at least a couple years, time and time again have the same testimony. Which is, 'I am so glad I have found this religion. Before I found it, I had no idea it was here.' For many people, the community and commonality they find here changes their lives, because life becomes richer and more meaningful when we actively nurture our spirituality in a way we are comfortable with. When I ask how they FOUND the church, I am astounded at what I hear. Often it is through an acquaintance or a friend, but much of the time it appears to be dumb luck. For example, one friend of mine at First Church of Austin said she found the church because she kept jogging by it on her running route and decided to check it out.

It's true that we have had a long-standing tradition of making a point to not evangelize what we have to offer. Like Alcoholics Anonymous, we are a program of "attraction rather than promotion." While I think that works very well for AA, I don't think that works as well for Unitarian Universalists. Part of my mission as a minister, is to convince y'all that it IS important for us to sell our message - that in fact, we have an obligation to because the world desperately needs it. There are so many people who feel left out of traditional religion - they feel left out because they do not feel accepted there for a variety of reasons, much less affirmed. But they don't find us because they are not aware that we're here, and they give up on going to church altogether.

We have a problem, however. Even if we euphemize the term "evangelize" with the term "outreach," which the young adults in our movement have been using for years, we have the essential problem of MESSAGE. Ironically, or perhaps appropriately, this is the same problem the Democrats have. We can't effectively deliver the good news if we are unable to articulate the message - a message that needs to be grounded and explained in plain language; we have to let go of abstract ideas that tend to lose our audience. We can pontificate and intellectualize all we want in our Covenant Groups - that is hardcore UU much in the same way that small group ministry in fundamentalist settings focuses on

conversion. The hardcore stuff is not what the fundamentalists sell on the first interface, and nor should we.

I know this because last Sunday I was visiting my family in the Chicago area and my parents and I decided to take a field trip. We went to a fundamentalist mega-church that serves the northern suburbs called Willow Creek. This church can house a service for 4,000 people at a time. Police were needed to direct traffic. I didn't know what to expect, but I left feeling a bit depressed because I was impressed. I was impressed that the sermon topic was very practical, and one I could have given myself, save for the brief reference to Satan at one point. This was a service designed for people checking it out, and so they didn't emphasize that they believe the Bible is without error, though that is printed in the literature you receive. What they emphasized was the simple message that, life is often difficult and overwhelming, but family is important and God loves you because you matter. On the whole this is too simplistic for religious liberals, and too self-centered. But in some ways, it's not that different from our message, and for a lot of people it's comforting and easy to understand.

The reason I went to this service is because I want to know what they're doing that's working - it is truly amazing how the formula used there is the same successful formula the Republicans use. In Rev. Morrill's commentary on the election he talks about how Democrats cling to facts but Republicans use a framework of mythology because story is more powerful than facts. Turning the terrorist attacks into a "WAR ON TERROR" evokes a compelling narrative. They're also good at using metaphors, such as the 'strict father' version of family. It makes sense that people who revere the Bible are going to respond well to story.

Morrill says that we need to inject story and metaphor into our values as well. He writes, "In the next four years, no doubt there will be cause to protest, to take to the streets. But perhaps a more important role for the liberal church will be to do the intellectual and soulful work of articulating and sharing our values. To do this effectively will mean using frames and metaphors. Being poets whose words move people's hearts. Sad as it is to say, Bush and the Republicans have been such stirring poets. This is the lesson of the political landscape."

"Luckily," he continues, "the same work needs to be done in the religious sphere, too. It may be connected to UUA President Bill Sinkford's call for UUs to adopt a 'language of reverence,' and is definitely connected to the current [UUA] Commission on Appraisal's [study on the topic of] 'Theological Unity Amidst our Diversity.'"

I agree with Morrill, that translating concepts into metaphors is in good part the work of the liberal church if we want to grow and become more accessible. The more we grow, the more our voice is going to be heard. "What story could liberals tell about the last few years?" Morrill asks. "I think the positive story is one of renewed political participation, ordinary citizens renewing the covenant of democracy. . . In such a story, each of us can see ourselves, each of us has a place."

We've got time to work on these narratives. And I think it's a creative, worthwhile, and inspiring thing to do. It's also healing, comforting and affirming. Because we know, deep within ourselves, that we have a stake on the truth - the truth about freedom and equity and how dynamic love can be. We believe in peace and diplomacy before dominance and aggression. We believe that hope is a part of innovation. We have core values that are as simple as caring for our fellow human beings, as simple as all human life is sacred the world over. Our family narrative is more about the nourishing father who emphasizes community and personal responsibility and co-operation. We do have a very compelling faith - and we can make it even more compelling if we transmit it through story.

Whether or not we use story, the bottom line is *that liberals need to figure out how to articulate their values better*. I have some ideas about how we can do this. As much as we celebrate and honor diversity, we need to spend more time on what our common ground is. What this means is that we need to set aside our passion for defending individual rights. Like Morrill says, there will be cause no doubt to dramatically and loudly protest whatever is on the conservative agenda that threatens our personal freedoms.

But it will be very inspiring and attractive to all that have ears to hear to clarify and uphold the values that ALL of us Americans have in common, regardless of what makes us different. The things that make us different from each other are political party, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, ability, sexual preference. But the values we hold in common regardless of all these categories are things like integrity, honesty, service, humility, commitment to our families, hard work. I know that both sides of any equation has a stake in the common good; we need to be going after what matters to us all, and transcend what makes us different. It's this kind of language that's going to make liberal religion strong because we can have faith that it is solid ground to stand on.

I hope I'm sounding a bit like Barack Obama, the new black Illinois Senator who said at the Democratic Convention, "there are no blue states of America, there are no red states of America, there are only the United States of America." That is simple but compelling rhetoric that we can get behind. We Unitarians are fond of complexity and nuance, but there is a lot to be said for simplicity. It "'Tis a gift to be simple" for the purpose of reaching out to others who not only need to hear our message but need to be able to truly RECEIVE it.

A large part of this has to do with getting out of our heads and into our hearts. There is nothing wrong with our intellect and it is an excellent resource. But I worry that, Democrats and Republicans alike, there is a high degree of anesthetization to the pain this country is suffering collectively. We aren't experiencing the shame around the prisoner abuses in Iraq as much as we should; we have no idea what it's like for the families who are losing loved ones in Iraq. There is also the pain and fear around having no health insurance, the pain of poverty as more folks fall through the cracks, the dwindling of human resources and safety nets for children and people with disabilities.

I don't mean to paint a glum picture, but I think rather than heap scorn upon Republicans, we need to attract their attention with their own style of verbal judo - we need to share the stories with them of ordinary Americans who are suffering. We need to tug at some heart-strings. I think some of our liberal values can best be expressed in metaphors of perseverance, of not giving up, of single parents and husbands and wives who work themselves to the bone so they can feed their children. Or the broken families caused by incarceration or parents forced to enlist in the army because there is no other job. Or the families of same sex parents who continue to contribute to their communities because they are as family-values minded and as patriotic as any other American family. We need to paint pictures of the folks who aren't giving up, as well as the folks who are.

The scorn of what we perceive to be an intellectual moral superiority to the religious right is of no use whatsoever. We can't keep swabbing our egos with that. I think we should allow our intellects to be smart about this, and find the ways we can most effectively communicate what we're about. It's not just the message, but how you deliver it, how you give it. We can't give it in anger or any kind of negativity. This is an image-dependent society, and we need to paint it in pictures - with characters, with heroes, with the kind of human traits we can all relate to. With the kind of plot-lines and struggles in life that are common to us all.

If we're so smart, we ought to be creative as well, and adaptable, no? I think we have a lot to do, and I'm excited about it. If you're still feeling bad about the election, let it go. Your resentment is only hurting you. Let's get on with it and seize the day. Let's make the next four years a creative process. What doesn't kill us can only make us stronger. Each of us has a gift to bring, and I invite you to think about what yours might be. Each of us is still an American - and we will not give up on the country we dearly love. We will keep loving it fiercely and with perseverance. We will paint pictures of the America we believe in.

And we will never give up. Never!

Let it be so.