

Healing the Political Mind
Rev. Hannah Petrie
October 23, 2016

Call to worship: 715

Prayer: 666

When I decided to write this sermon back in early September, the polls were in a dead heat between our two presidential candidates. Now, six weeks later, it's not looking like such a dead heat anymore. Yet it's not a time to become complacent, even if we are sick and tired of politics.

Whatever the result in November, how might we reflect on this topsy-turvy election, so we could learn from it, progress from it, and evolve our country toward one that is more unified, compassionate, and peaceful? Where every child, no matter what house she's born in, no matter what color his skin is, has the opportunity to live the American dream, with enough to live comfortably and if desired, raise a family.

Every American deserves that chance, regardless of one's worldview. How can we work together for the common dream of living with fulfillment? Because, if the polls are right, when Secretary Clinton takes office, she will face gridlock in congress much like President Obama has in his tenure. The cultural shift that needs to take place from one of division to functional cooperation needs to occur *at the people's level* – as in, we the people, we who democratically choose who represents us. But how can this occur?

It starts with you and me and people we know and love who share different political views. We can find hope and healing in these relationships, especially if we have some tools to help us see where the other is coming from.

The Republican party and its cratering, crumbling, imploding - choose your favorite verb here that describes 'falling apart' – has been really something to watch, and while liberals may look upon it with some glee, that glee will be short-lived because it's really a sign of national instability we should be concerned about. It is a seed of discontent that could grow into grapes of wrath, maybe even a 2nd Civil War if we don't figure out a way to meet needs and move forward.

One might use the word crisis – and in crisis, there is opportunity. I want to reflect on that opportunity today, and highlight indicators of hope – the first being that, when we each see that we have a role to play in healing our divisive political mindsets, *we are empowered* when we take responsibility for the democracy to which we all belong.

What does this have to do with religion and spirituality, you may wonder? It has everything to do with religion, and ours specifically. Religious liberals such as ourselves have held democratic ideals sacred for a long time. It's one of our

principles, the 5th one: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. We value caring and fairness in terms of social equality, which is at the heart of our social justice imperatives and the moral convictions that give our faith teeth, substance, and meaning. When we work in service of repairing our democracy, we are acting on our religious beliefs of creating a just society.

So here is the healing tool you might bring into your relationships and dialogues with people who differ in political orientation. The main crux of Jonathan Haidt's research in his 2012 book, "The Righteous Mind," is that there are five moral foundations of the political, or righteous mind: Caring, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity, or tradition. The left and the right value all five, but the left emphasize the first two, caring and fairness, while the right emphasize the last three, loyalty, authority, and tradition.

I want to talk about some relationships in my life that might evoke thoughts of your own. I'm someone who not only values racial and ethnic diversity in my day-to-day life as part of my community, but also political diversity. It's not because I'm a moderate - I'm solidly left - it's because some of these people are like family to me, so deeply do I love and appreciate them. I don't have any blood relatives who are conservative, and I've heard a few horror stories of last year's thanksgiving when different political persuasions sit down to eat and it's not pretty. My friend Chris told me he wore a Bernie Sanders T-shirt to Thanksgiving last November hosted by his husband's in-laws, who are staunch Trump supporters. It did not go well. Chris has decided he'd rather come have Thanksgiving at my house this year, even if he misses the chance to gloat among his Trump-thumping relatives. But I'll ask Chris what he thinks about the Haidt research and if he think it could help him build any rapport with his family.

I've known Chris since 4th grade, and I have an even older friend, Angie, who goes back to 3rd grade. She's republican, though this year she says she's voting for Hillary. Same with my friend David, who I've known about ten years. David says the election has been traumatizing for him, reminding him of growing up with his untreated, bi-polar mother. He says Trump being like a loose cannon reminds him of his mother being the same, not knowing what would happen next. It could explain David's attraction to conservatism, the desire for order in the form of loyalty, authority, and tradition. My friend Angie also values high standards of order in her life - her house is immaculate; all storage containers in the basement are neatly organized - perhaps because her father has been in and out of prison her whole life.

I don't mean to home in on deeply imperfect parents as the key to determining conservatism. Whatever determines it, keep in mind the moral values conservatives hold dear are also held by liberals, but conservatives prioritize them before liberals do. If liberals could remember these prioritized values when interacting with conservatives, it could help liberals see where conservatives are coming from.

Both my friends Angie and David value loyalty, which is one reason why Angie and I have been friends for 35 years, even though we are very different. I've been inspired by David in his loyalty to his country, that he will not stand by a party he sees as destroying what America is really about. That is one of the brightest beams of hope in this election cycle: so many conservatives saying, "no, we won't stand by this, the values of our party's candidate are not okay," including many high profile republicans such as Mitt Romney.

Some other wonderful Republicans in my life are sticking with Trump, but, thanks to studying the principles of Haidt's research a little bit, I see why it makes sense for them. For a year and a half, I've been working with a family in Altadena, whose 26-year old son was killed in a gang murder in front of a restaurant in the neighborhood we share, even though he had walked away from gang life several years before. This is a conservative, middle-class African American family who gave their son every advantage, including private school, but it wasn't enough to protect him from affiliation with the Crips throughout his formative years. Because I helped the family organize a march in observance of this tragedy, I've become close with them, continuing to community-organize around an effort called Council for Peaceful Community.

I've gained much perspective from this family. The parents, Ursula and Richard Walker, are committed, conservative Christians. They decry the Black Lives Matter movement because they feel so strongly that people should take responsibility for themselves and not be interacting negatively with police in the first place, and that the authority of the police should be respected. They especially respect the tradition of the armed services, and connect their enjoyment of freedom with freedom protected by the US military. It's all there: tradition, authority, and loyalty, as part of their worldview. No, I don't agree with them on everything, but I respect where they are coming from, because I've gotten to know them, and I see how strong their love as a family is, and how graceful they are in the face of tremendous loss. It is their faith that's gotten them through, as well as the traditions of familial and community ties.

Even though we are very different, the Walkers and I are learning from each other. We're brought together in our common values of caring, and working to remove community violence from the Altadena Pasadena area. We are liberals and conservatives working together for a higher cause.

So who are the people in your life with whom you disagree politically? Hopefully you aren't already un-friended on Facebook, as I've heard happening lately, but if you are, is there no common ground on which you can walk? Sometimes it does take being the bigger person, being the lesser judgmental, to be the first to open the door between you. These are some of my dearest values as a Unitarian Universalist: the high road, radical compassion, and acceptance. We need not prescribe to another's worldview to see where we are both human, and fundamentally good

people, who both care and have valid, though differing perspectives. The righteous mind - which we might think of as a veneer – when it's chipped away, underneath, we are people with the same needs and similar desires.

The truth is, Americans agree on a lot more than they don't. I went to a fundraiser last Sunday for Public Citizen, which is a lobbyist group that counters all the corporate lobbies on K street in Washington. The Director, Robert Weissman, had this to say:

There's a story of convention that says we are a divided nation. It has some truth, but it overshadows another story that is at least equally or more important. We're actually an amazingly united country when it comes to the public policy agenda that Americans favor. 83% of Americans think the top 1% have too much power; ¾ of Americans favor a steep rise of the minimum wage; 9 out of 10 Americans say we need stronger financial regulations; 4 out of 5 voters favor expanding social security; 3 out of 4 Americans say they want to close corporate tax loopholes; 3 out of 4 Americans favor stricter air pollution standards; more than 9 in 10 Americans say corporations should be held more accountable to the law.

It was surprising yet hopeful to hear that. And then it didn't seem so surprising, because it's what I suspected all along. We as Americans, whatever our religion or social location or color, are united in the basic tenets of fairness and caring, but somehow there is benefit for corporate advertizing to have us believe we are hopelessly divided. It's some kind of divide and conquer strategy, and currently, the majority of the American people are getting the shorter end of the stick. So the bad news is that we have to do this kind of work, we have to sleuth this out and our bs radar has to be finely tuned. But the good news is that we are, by and large, on the same side.

And the more we dialogue and relate to one another with respect and genuine interest, the more we wake up and realize our power as one people, in a "post-partisan" way.

Wouldn't it be great if, modeling after the success of the debate-watching parties, the UU Church of Studio City had a series of events here where we brought different sides together to dialogue and learn from the other's perspective?

That is something religious liberals such as ourselves are especially equipped to do, and we should consider it an honor, when we are able to be the peace-makers, and facilitate dialogues or modes of understanding.

But even if we are unable to have the verbal conversations about contentious matters, we may yet be able to be in relationship with one another, if the other is willing, and that is hugely positive when compared to the alternative of ignorance, animosity, and having no relationship. In fact, such relationships should be treasured in our lives, for they spread good will and give us hope.

So, hang in there, dear ones – we only have a little more than two weeks to go. But, come to peace with the fact that achieving an election result doesn't signify the end, it signifies a potential beginning, a post-partisan era where everyone's gifts are brought to the table, and are equally valued in this continuing experiment of democracy. We are blessed to be a part of it, this great American family, even when some members of our family drive us nuts. In the end, let us all sit down together and break bread in peace, sharing our hopes and excitement about the common dream, where all boys and girls can grow up in peace and prosperity.

May it be so, Amen.

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