

ONE NATION UNDER WHOSE GOD?

Patriotic Thoughts from a Red, White, & Blue Native Born American!

Several weeks ago when I started thinking about doing a sermon for Independence Day weekend, I was thinking about all the things that make this nation different and why it has been a good thing for the world for the United States to exist for these 239 years or so. Then at our UU General Assembly, an Action of Immediate Witness resolution was introduced calling us to support the Black Lives Matter movement. There was another AIW resolution asking us to support the Lummi tribe's effort to stop the largest coal loading complex on the west coast from being built on land sacred to the tribe. Another asked us to demand the release of undocumented immigrant families from Federal detention under horrific circumstances. And we received news of the Supreme Court's affirmation of the right of same-sex couples to marry and have their marriages recognized throughout the United States.

Throughout General Assembly, there were discussions about the rights of indigenous Native Peoples of North America, people brought to North America as Slaves against whom discrimination remains rampant, and immigrant peoples, many of whose ancestors once owned large segments of this nation but who now are refused entrance. GLBTQ persons in the news, of course are mostly natural born Americans, but they too have been discriminated against and treated as second class citizens.

As a male white Anglo-Saxon former Protestant, I have not often felt any discrimination and have often benefited from White Male privilege. My Jewish and Catholic ancestors have of course faced serious discrimination at times in this country and in parts of Europe. If I do have the tiny bit of blood denied by my grandmother but embraced by my mother from the Oneida Tribe of the Algonquin Nation, then I could claim a spark of the discrimination long felt by American Indians.

Most of my ancestors only came here from Europe 3-4 generations ago; from Hungary carrying my Germanic Jewish surname, and from Ireland, England, Scotland, and France carrying my mother's family names of Jarvis and Child. Most of my family was light skinned, with a preference for Blue Eyes. Before my hair and beard turned gray there were stray red and blond strands among the brown, and my children and I had blond hair when young while one aunt and many cousins on my mother's side had red hair. I mention this merely to affirm, that I, as well as most Americans of these United States, are really mutts, with a mixed and varied background coming from many parts of the world.

And though I regularly affirm that I would rather hail from the United States than from any other nation, this great nation is certainly not without significant flaws, blind spots, and areas needing change and growth. As I have become older and hopefully wiser, I have become even more aware of the many places where our nation fails to live up to the promise of the Declaration of Independence, some of which such as the value of slaves and women were enshrined in the Constitution requiring later amendments to repair. Other failures of our nation have taken laws and court rulings to protect the rights of various persons. Our tripartite form of government has shown itself to be durable and effective but slow in response to injustice. Our form of national governance has also been shown to be too susceptible to the power and influence of wealthy minorities and corporations.

One new effort to overturn the Citizens United ruling on Corporate Personhood which declared political expenditures to be free speech via a Constitutional Amendment was introduced in a series of workshops at General Assembly. Unitarian Universalism, from whose predecessor bodies came many of the Founding Fathers of our nation, continues to struggle to shape our nation according to the highest values of humanity.

In regard to the resolution of support for Black Lives Matter, it was a virtual certainty that it would be supported, but there was a significant struggle over the meaning of language in the resolution. Strongly

supported by the youth caucus, the language of the resolution was crafted to match language of the Black Lives Matter movement, including the call to abolish prisons. While recognizing that prisons and the legal system perpetrate great injustices upon persons of color, many of us were unwilling to call for the abolition of prisons, while supporters of the resolution demanded that it be passed intact rather than replace the word “abolish” with “reform.” Eventually it was amended to add a redefinition of abolition to call for a replacement of the penal system with something better. This was largely a generational issue in which specificity of language mattered far more to older generations than to younger, even though most were strongly in support of the resolution.

Of course, the deaths of 9 blacks at an AME Bible Study in the shootings in South Carolina shortly before General Assembly only added to the concerns that have been raised about resurgent racism in Ferguson, Baltimore, New York, and elsewhere around the country. While the call to take down the Confederate Flag, whose widespread use mostly dates to the 1960s, is welcomed by many of us, the cost in lives has been horrific. The remaining support for the Confederate Flag is another reminder of the racial, political and moral divides still existing in this country. The court-defying refusal of many county clerks and judges to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, mostly in the South, is another sign of the divisions still at play in this potentially great nation of ours. Often it seems that we are more untied than united.

As a religious movement stemming from the early days of Christianity but whose many roots are anchored in the enlightenment and whose greatest expressions came to fruit in the early days of our nation, we hold an even greater responsibility to hold this country to the highest standards of morality. Our principles affirming the inherent worth of all persons, calling for justice and equity in human relations, challenging individuals to seek out truth and wisdom, and calling for a commitment to a democratic global unity are among the broadest expressions of enlightenment thought. Though many new UUs are more excited by our

acceptance of a wide range of spiritual and religious journeys, it is at the core of our movement to seek justice, equality, and compassion for all.

One of the greatest divides now existing in our country is between the one percent of persons holding the greatest wealth and power and the 99 percent who do not have either wealth or power. Several workshops at GA addressed this gap, calling in various ways for a redistribution of wealth, taxation of the wealthy to better support social programs and an increase to minimum wage laws to insure that all persons would receive a living wage. The ever-increasing chasm between those holding the greatest wealth and the rest of us is unprecedented in the modern world. For Justice and Equity with compassion to prevail, this chasm of wealth and power must be narrowed, and the influence of wealth and power on the government through the political process must be limited.

Our nation, that great experiment begun in July of 1776, remains as yet an unfulfilled dream, an unrealized potential by many measures. Much has been accomplished, but the power of wealthy bankers and international corporations not only stands in the way of further progress, it promises the growth of injustice accompanying the widening of the chasm between the mega-wealthy and everyone else. This economic reality also increases the polarities of race and gender success stories and increases the likelihood of further disunity among various groups trying to gain a foothold on the beaches of power.

The religious, political, spiritual, and moral question of our era, is where do we go from here in the quest to insure a good and meaningful life for all persons? Those who would turn Unitarian Universalism into solely a spiritual home for those with differing views would forget the call of our Principles to an engaged effort to shape a healthier society and world. Though I hope we shall always be open to those with varying spiritual and religious views, it is also incumbent upon us to work for justice in every sphere and arena.

Personally, I have my reservations about the Black Lives Matter movement, in its origins in the shooting in Ferguson of a threatening but likely unarmed criminal and its all or nothing demands. Yet, I fully recognize the great need for further progress in matters of race, as well as gender, age, and ability. Equality suggests we should rather declare that All Lives Matter, but the history of this nation on matters of race is particularly problematic, with justice in that arena remaining elusive. Therefore I will support the Black Lives Matter movement for the wider issues it represents, but reserving my moral right and obligation to recognize the shortcomings of even that effort to rectify the wrongs of centuries. I encourage you also to support this movement even as you keep your eyes open to resist when necessary the excesses that tend to appear along with the monolithic nature of any such movement.

During the Ware lecture, the keynote talk at General Assembly, Cornel West emphatically shared the comment: “I see the mega-churches, but where is the mega justice?” Cornel West, preaching with the energy of his Baptist origins and the academic awareness of his professorial role, voiced appreciation for Unitarian Universalism while encouraging UUs to continue to speak out for justice. As a movement we have neither the members nor the money to have the kind of influence that a number of wealthy individuals and larger movements wield, and yet we have often succeeded in helping to bring about change through the strength of our commitment to justice. From the days of abolition, suffrage, medical and mental health and prison reform; responding to the call to march with Martin Luther King through the Civil Rights movement, joining the peace movement, and more recently helping to lead the GLBTQ Rights movement, Unitarians, Universalists, and UUs have been energetically engaged in the struggle for Justice with Compassion.

Today, the struggles for racial and gender justice continue to need our support and energy. As Unitarian Universalists we must continue to support the quest for equity and justice for all persons in our congregations, our communities, our states and nations, and the world. We may undertake these efforts at times along with the majority of

Americans and at times as the loyal opposition, but our energy in the quest for a better America and a better world is still needed.

This summer's UU General Assembly passed a Statement of Conscience on Reproductive Justice and continued to explore the Congregational Study Action Issue on Escalating Inequality. Our congregation along with the other congregations of the UU Association are encouraged to study this issue and present ideas back to the UU Commission on Social Witness in the next year as that group begins to form the next Statement of Conscience which will be presented for a vote in 2018. Many justice efforts around race, economic inequality, wealth wages and taxation, as well as other issues fall under the umbrella of the Study Action Issue on Escalating Inequality. Our consideration of joining with PACT, the local PICO interfaith organizing group, to develop justice programs, easily fits into this effort. This is something that we can join together to do as a congregation while also partnering with other interfaith congregations in this area. This is a way that we can act out our call to justice with compassion and fulfill our quest to insure a good and meaningful life for all persons.

There always will be more to do, always more good efforts to support, but this would be a good starting place which we could share together as a congregation! The journey toward real justice spans a path throughout history and flows into the unknown world yet to come. I invite you to join together in this quest to shape a better world!

So may it Be! Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!