

A Pre-Election Reflection

[Note: This sermon, quite obviously, was delivered prior to the November 8 election. I will only note that the outcome does not alter the sentiments expressed here.]

I turned seven years old in the summer of 1952. At that point in my life I was spending my summers on a small farm my grandfather had in southern Ohio, along with an aunt and two uncles. My memories of the summers I spent there, from my grade school years until I reached my early teens, tend to run together when it comes to my remembering what happened during which year. But I especially remember the summer of '52 as my introduction to politics. It came about by my listening to the radio broadcasts—we had no television—of the Republican and Democratic national conventions.

The Edingtons were strong Republicans, and were disappointed when their Ohio United States Senator, Robert Taft, lost the Republican presidential nomination to General Dwight Eisenhower. But they soon came to “like Ike” well enough. They also listened to the Democratic convention as Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson got that party’s nomination. I doubt the fact that Governor Stevenson was a Unitarian would have cut any mustard with the Edingtons of Ohio and West Virginia since none of us even knew what a Unitarian was at that time. In any case, it was Eisenhower’s year all the way to the general election, and his subsequent re-election four years later.

Those radio broadcasts fascinated me. I listened to the speeches—the content of which I could scarcely understand—and tried to picture the speaker at a podium holding forth to these large cheering throngs. I even acted out my own version of what I’d heard on the radio by going up into the woods behind the house, climbing up on a large boulder-like rock, and cutting loose with a few of stem-winders of my own to the assembled delegates, who bore a remarkable resemblance to a bunch of trees.

That was pretty much the extent of my political career. But I never lost my attraction to, and interest in, our political processes at all levels of government. As I later studied the history of our country I came to increasingly value and treasure the role of the democratic process in the life of our nation. With all of its imperfections, and at times failings, this process has still kept us together as one nation—even overcoming the bloody horror of a civil war. And while I’ve never had any interest in holding elective office, I’ve long felt a responsibility to be a part of that democratic process in as informed a way as I can.

This is the 16th Presidential election I’ve witnessed since that summer of '52. This is one like no other. It is the orange in a bucket of 15 apples. More on that momentarily.

I entered the UU parish ministry in the fall of 1979; and I’m still at it. Every four years since then, on the first Sunday in November—beginning in 1980—I have offered a pre-election sermon as the time for choosing a President draws near.

Whenever I set out to prepare such a sermon I'm reminded of a vignette told by the Rev. David Rankin in a little booklet of reminiscences from his years in the ministry that he published many years ago. I've used some of them before. This one has to do with a letter David received after his pre-election sermon of 1968. It read as follows: "Dear Rev. Rankin—Politics has no place in the pulpit. When you said that in choosing between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey we should vote for the best man, you were obviously attacking Mr. Nixon." However fair-minded you may try to be, sometimes you just can't win.

In all of the pre-election sermons I've offered I've never endorsed a candidate; if, for no other reason, to do so would be to jeopardize the tax exempt status of the churches I've served. Of course, with each election I've had my strong personal preference. But what I've tried to do in my sermons is to state what I see as being the more crucial issues in any Presidential election, state where I stand on those issues, and leave the choice of candidate to the congregants.

In each of those elections, strong as my personal preference may have been, I've felt that either of the two major party candidates were basically capable of handling the day to day duties and demands of the Presidency, although it was a close call with a few of them. In addition I felt that they had the overall well-being, health and stability of our country at heart. I also felt they possessed the essential moral character, and the general level of temperament, that the Office of the Presidency calls for, however simpatico, or not, I was with them politically.

I also felt that for whatever differences I may have had with either major party candidate when it came to foreign policy, I could still trust either of them to responsibly represent our country on the larger world stage. Again, it was a close call at times with a few of them, but that was still my reckoning.

I'm afraid such is not the case for me this time around. That's what I meant a few minutes ago when I said this election is the orange in the barrel of apples when it comes to the elections I've witnessed—and, from my age of eligibility, voted in over the course of my life. For the first time in my life I am seeing a major party candidate who, by my reckoning, possesses few, if any, of the qualities and attributes I feel the Presidency requires.

I do not have to stand here and endorse a candidate, any candidate, in order to state that I regard one of the major party candidates as simply and basically unfit to hold the Office of President of the United States. I am also aware that this does not preclude his election. I do not assume an outcome at this point. We'll know soon enough.

I know I'm carrying the proverbial coals to Newcastle to be offering a pre-election sermon in a UU Church, and in a State where the Democratic nominee, Mrs. Clinton, holds a lead on the plus or minus side of 20 points. That should not, of course, deter any of you from voting this coming Tuesday.

So with all I've said to this point as backdrop, I have three bases to touch as we approach this Presidential election.

Base One: One of the things this Presidential campaign has revealed is a level of estrangement—a dangerous level in some cases—on the part of a certain segment of our citizenry that is truly disturbing.

I have some sense, at least, as to where those feelings of estrangement are coming from. My family roots, as you've heard me say before, are in the State of West Virginia. This is a State that Donald Trump will most likely carry by at least as many points as he will likely lose in Massachusetts. I'm going to go back to something I said from this pulpit last August 6th when we hosted the Community UU Summer Service and my topic was "Recovering the Universalist Vision." Here's some of what I said then as it pertains to my topic for today:

For reasons I can only, at best, partially understand we have a segment of our population who feel that their identity, their sense of who they are, their uniqueness, has somehow been trampled on or gone unnoticed or unappreciated.

I do have some sense as to where those feelings are coming from. I was raised in a low-income, white, working class family in southern West Virginia. My father was a self-employed house painter whose formal education went to the eighth grade. In the words of that old Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young song, "He worked like to devil to be poor." My Dad loved and cared about his family. He was a devout member of his church. But beyond his family and church—which did count for a lot with him—he wasn't given much reason beyond that to feel that his life counted for much, or that the persons in power who were making decisions that affected his life, or his view of the world and his place in it, really cared that much about him however much he cared about his country.

My Dad has been gone for some time now, so I cannot say with certainty where he would be in this Presidential campaign. But I can see, given his overall station and standing in life, how something deep within his psyche would have responded well to someone seeking the Presidential office and saying, 'I'll be your voice.' And it wouldn't have mattered if that someone was a self-indulgent, narcissistic billionaire (maybe) with no clue as to what my father's life was about. Even the illusion—and that's what it is, an illusion—even the illusion that some rich and powerful person, who didn't care what he said—however ugly and demagogic—or who he offended, but who supposedly cared about him might have been enough to have secured my father's vote. As I say, I'll never know for sure, but that's my best guess.

I won't pursue this point too much further today, but I plan to return to it before I complete my ministry here. When I do I'll be drawing on a book titled *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance. The author is the same age as my son, which puts him exactly one generation after me, but he came out of the same social and cultural milieu as I did. What Vance writes about—in very brief and broad strokes for now—is a sense of hopelessness on the part of the people he grew up around that their lot in life is not going to improve. And if they cannot do anything about their station in life,

well, they can at least metaphorically flip their middle digit at all they feel is holding them down and ignoring them, and support a Presidential candidate who they see as doing the same. I am far from blind to the fact that there are any number of crude racist, misogynistic, and just plain hateful people within the ranks of the Trump supporters. They are truly scary folks, and their “hero”, so to speak, has, shamefully, done nothing to restrain them. That said, however, Mr. Trump’s supporters cannot be reduced to such persons. There is a wider sentiment he has tapped into that goes beyond this hateful core constituency. This is the part of our citizenry that Mr. Vance writes about—persons who feel more of a sense of bewilderment and loss and estrangement than they do hatred.

Mr. Vance wrote his book before the emergence of Mr. Trump, but he offers some good insights as to why there is so much fertile ground, in certain areas of our country right now, for the kind of dangerous demagoguery we’ve witnessed in his Presidential campaign. And that kind of fertile ground will still be there well after this election has come and gone, whatever its outcome. It is ground that those of us of a moderate to liberal stripe ignore at our peril.

Base Two. For his one I turn to a column by David Brooks, an op-ed writer for The New York Times. A couple of weeks ago he wrote of how this campaign has eroded what he calls our “moral capital.” He defines the term in this way: “Moral capital is the set of shared habits, norms, institutions, and values that make common life possible. Left to our own we human beings have an impressive tendency for selfishness. Unadorned, the struggle for power has a tendency to become barbaric. So, people in decent societies agree on a million informal restraints—codes of politeness, humility and mutual respect that girdle selfishness and steer us towards reconciliation.”

Without pulling any punches, Mr. Brooks—who, by the way, is the Times resident conservative columnist—goes on to say, “This year Mr. Trump is dismantling those restraints one by one...It is becoming ever clearer that the nation’s moral capital is being decimated, and the urgent challenge is to name that decimation and reverse it.”

Mr. Brooks is a conservative in the quite literal sense of the term. He seeks to conserve those norms, principles, values, and codes of behavior that make a civil society civil. And for whatever differences I may have with him on matters of social policy, I agree with him that unless there is some base-line level of what he calls moral capital, then those differences on social policy issues cannot even be reasonably debated and, hopefully, resolved.

“The urgent challenge is to name that decimation and reverse it.” That is the challenge that will have to be met on November 9, and in the days, weeks, months, and maybe even years thereafter. My hope is that a Clinton Presidency will foster an atmosphere in which that reversal of the loss of our moral capital may go forward. A Trump Presidency—and we cannot rule out that possibility—will make the reversal of that loss even all the more crucial. It would push those of us who see our social fabric being eroded by hatred and bigotry to seek out and act on even greater and more forceful ways of standing on the side of love. If it comes to that, we will deal with it accordingly.

Base Three. I turn here to the quote in your Order of Service for today: “What is politics if not the highest expression of our moral feelings as a people?” These words are by Rev. Robert Edgar, a former member of the United States Congress who served six terms representing a Congressional District in Pennsylvania. He was also an ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church. Following his congressional career Rev. Edgar served a seven year term as the Executive Secretary of the National Council of Churches. The NCC is a consortium of moderate-to-liberal Protestant Denominations in the United States. Our UUA has observer status within this organization since we are not a definitively Christian denomination; but we do share the NCC’s stances on a number of social and civic issues. Rev. Edgar passed away three years ago.

The quote is from his book titled *Middle Church*, published in 2006, in which Rev. Edgar issues a call to mainline, mainstream persons of faith to not abandon the political arena to the religious right. Hear his words again: “What is politics if not the highest expression of our moral feelings as a people?” Admittedly this is a highly idealistic sentiment since it’s a statement of what politics—at its best—is all about.

Edgar’s point was, and is, that our political processes—at any number of levels—offer an opportunity for citizens to bring their highest principles and values to the public, civic arena. Granted he was in the political arena himself long enough to know that in the rough and tumble, and sometimes down and dirty doings of political activity, we often fall far short of the ideal he states. But it’s important, even crucial, that this ideal be held up nonetheless as a reminder of what responsible and dedicated and caring citizenry means and requires.

The saddest thing for me about this Presidential election has to do with how we have nearly lost sight of this ideal and principle. Yes, some of those “highest expressions of our moral feelings” have found a voice at times in recent months. Tragically, however, it has been some of the lower expressions of our feelings as a people that have found the louder voice. However distant of a goal it may sound, the recovery of this ideal and principle is essential if our democratic processes are to go forward: “What is politics if not the highest expression of our moral feelings as a people.” Indeed. Indeed.

One of the fundamental principles of sermon preparation and delivery is to close on a positive note, whatever your sermon topic may be. I’ll stick to that principle today. What I see before me right here is a community of commitment, a community that seeks to embody and live out those high moral feelings as a people to which Mr. Edgar refers. And I know you’ll still be here, in body or spirit, next Sunday—whatever this week brings us—and in the days, weeks, and years after that. The presence of such communities of commitment within the fabric of our larger civic and cultural landscape must continue and grow stronger and have an ever stronger voice. I believe we are well able to that task.

Stephen Edington
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