

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Voting Our UU Values”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 6, 2016

Sermon

I expect there are no undecided voters here today. Even if there are a few, I'm not going to expose them by asking for a show of hands. Given the extreme length of the campaign season, and Albany being the extremely political town, I also expect there is nothing I can say or not say to influence your vote. I suspect the same is probably true about whether or not you'll vote. But I'll exhort you to do so anyway since that is a bedrock value of our UU commitment to democracy.

So what to talk about this morning has been vexing me all week. Most of us are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the candidates. Each has failures in their past, though the character deficits are strikingly different and cannot be compared on the same scale.

What I find most interesting and most disturbing about this election cycle is the process people are using to decide who to vote for. It is anything but a careful, rational analysis that weighs the pros and cons of each candidate's positions on the issues, their governing philosophy, and their party platform. I've looked at both candidates this way and see interesting proposals from each one.

More than any other election in recent memory, this one is being conducted primarily on character and personal values. Perhaps we're more aware than ever that campaign promises don't mean that much, in comparison, to wondering whether the next President, sitting in the Oval Office next to the red phone, will start World War III after a temper tantrum.

Behind this change in attitude is a new voting block. This morning, I'd like to look at the newly identified voting block that Donald Trump has brought together. They are a very powerful group who are not going away. They have found each other and flexed their muscles to nominate Trump as their candidate. Liberal progressives cannot write these people off as crazy racist sexist bigots. Whoever gets elected will need to be able to understand the values and deep needs driving this constituency.

If Unitarian Universalists want to be relevant, in the advocacy work we do for the social wellbeing of our society, we need to understand them too. We need to understand the forces that bring that voting block together.

One of the biggest anomalies in this election has been the Evangelical values voters. These Christians ought to be choosing a Presidential candidate based on their upstanding moral character and high minded values. One would have expected that a man who promotes gambling, has had extramarital affairs, been married three times, with a record of lying and cheating would be a completely unacceptable candidate. The report of his obscene references to women and the confirmation by women of his unwanted sexual advances ought to make him radioactive as a candidate.

And then Trump released a list of conservative judges that he would be willing to nominate to the federal courts and the Supreme Court. That was all it took to bring the Evangelicals (reportedly 80% of them) to heel. For these voters nothing is more important than putting a strong conservative voice back on the court to take Scalia's place. This makes me wonder if the power of the Supreme Court in controversial social issues of the day is somewhat out of balance with the Legislative and Executive Branches to have such sway on them.

Who would have expected the Republican champions of free trade would be steamrolled by the Trump constituency! I wanted to have you listen to Moore's words mostly because he captures the feeling so well of this voting block. Those formerly privileged white men have been taken down, lost status and their economic security. They can't compete in this new global economy that values free trade. And tragically, these are the people who are shopping at Walmart, Target, and other big box stores, or are buying their goods on line through Amazon. By choosing cheaper goods they are driving their jobs out of America. And they don't want to compete with Mexicans for construction jobs, one of the few good paying jobs that can't be exported to China.

Many folks from Red States have served overseas in the last 15 years of proxy war against terrorism. They have seen the destruction and devastation that they don't want to see come back to America. It doesn't make them feel at all friendly to new immigrants from the Middle-East or Afghanistan who might bring Islamism with them. The yellowing and browning of America brings fear that whites will be voted off the island in the future. And the only way to stop that is by stockpiling guns and ammo.

The tension in our society is growing with significant demographic changes that are marching forward. Soon whites will be a minority in this country. Emotions are running higher and higher.

And into this volatile moment in time, Trump has appeared to light a match, throw it on the tinder and fan the flames. His television shows have taught him how to find and hold an audience. And extremism is his ticket.

And from what we know about how the brain works, once the survival emotions get fired up the rational centers shut down. People dig in and stop listening to each other and start seeing each other as enemies.

We need to stop this process of alienation and polarization for the good of the nation whoever wins on Tuesday. One way to do that is to look for common values behind the positions and rhetoric. And one person who can help us get back into our rational minds about the political candidates and the election is Jonathan Haidt.

Johnathan Haidt has done us a great service by helping us frame the differences in prioritization of values by the left and the right. Some of you heard me talk about his research and do a class on his book [The Righteous Mind](#) four years ago.

Haidt surveyed the moral systems of the world looking for universal moral values. Then he linked them to an evolutionarily driven, emotional source. So far he has identified six predominant moral values that have strong emotional roots that drive them. While they appear to be universal moral values found in almost every culture, people's political orientation affects how they use them, or not.

The first three are near and dear to many a liberal's heart. The first and dominant moral value that many cherish, rooted in the emotion of compassion or selfless love, is caring and non-harming. This oxytocin influenced parenting value drives us to care for children, the weak and the vulnerable. Religion overflows with this moral value expressed as: Love thy neighbor, care for the widow and orphan, give to the poor and offer hospitality to the stranger. No social organization, let alone the perpetuation of the species, could happen without this connecting moral value.

The second value, again familiar to liberals, is fairness. Cohesive communities require a way of rewarding cooperation and punishing cheating. Evolution discourages free-loaders because they undermine the survival of the fittest. The internal emotions that reinforce fairness are gratitude and guilt. Anger operates as the enforcer emotion that drives us to punish cheaters.

While care and fairness operate effectively at the personal and tribal level, the next moral value applies to larger social organizations that agricultural settlement and domestication of animals made possible. The third value Haidt identified is liberty or freedom from oppression. Haidt speculates this value may have evolved as a check against the abuse of power. The emotions of outrage, anger and fear drive this value. This value motivates the NRA gun loving survivalists as well as the supporters of women's reproductive rights.

Care, fairness and liberty form the core moral values liberals and libertarians cherish. Yet there are three more moral values Haidt has identified that many liberals may not appreciate, at least not at first. These are frequently associated with conservative moral values.

The fourth moral value is loyalty and its opposite is betrayal. Loyalty binds us to a group or institution at the sacrifice of our autonomy. Loyalty drives people to subordinate their independence to the larger whole, riding on the emotion of belonging and pride. Every social organization prizes the loyalty of its members and followers. Armies demand loyalty and, in turn, offer an experience of belonging that civilian life is hard pressed to match. Liberals often don't appreciate this value. Cherishing their freedom, many are reluctant to commit themselves and bind themselves to a group and adopt the group identity as their own.

The fifth moral value linked to loyalty is authority. Authority arises from hierarchical social organization that divides people into leaders and followers. In nature, it is that urge to rank organisms into higher and lower status, such as competing to be the alpha dog or establishing the pecking order in chickens, think high school competition for teenagers. Emotions of respect, aggression, dominance and fear drive this moral value. Liberals tend to loathe hierarchies. They love egalitarian organizing by consensus that puts everyone at the same level, more like a nomadic tribe of hunter gatherers. Conservatives however see value in hierarchy and loyalty to build strong institutions that can enforce fairness and support caring.

The sixth and last moral value is sanctity or purity. Haidt believes this critical value evolved as a way to protect group health and wellness. Many societies have elaborate rules for sorting foods and behaviors into clean and unclean categories. The root emotion for this moral value is disgust. Much of the controversies surrounding sexual identity and orientation are primarily emotional rather than rational. Liberals recognize this emotional source and see its irrationality. They have little patience with it, tending to identify it as a superstitious evolutionary prehensile tail. Conservatives that honor

the continuity of tradition, looking backwards to find the stability of an older order that agrees with their feelings are more influenced by this moral value.

If you look at the colored bar graph, you'll understand even better why Trump and Clinton are so polarized against each other. Trump supporters are higher than average on the Conservative matrix of loyalty-Authority-Sanctity values and Clinton supporters care less about them. Clinton supporters are more interested in empathetic caring for those who haven't been treated fairly. Trump supporters think the system is fairer than Clinton supporters and those suffering are getting their just desserts for their laziness and lack of initiative. In effect, they are mirror opposites of each other when it comes to their core values.

So where do UU's fall on this values matrix? As you might expect from looking at our Black Lives Matter banner on the side of our building, we highly value care, liberty and fairness. Our first two principles are the Inherent worth and dignity of every person and justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Rather than blame the victim of systemic oppression, we want to change the system. We also want the freedom to shape our own ethics and morals in alignment with our own beliefs.

We aren't ones to conform to the crowd with blind loyalty to God and country. Many of us consider ourselves citizens of the planet first, looking out for the planet's wellbeing before national interest. Our green, ethic of interdependence advances the good of the whole before the special interests of tribes, corporations or nationalities. We will not yield to an authority that might be self-serving, corrupt or abusive. Rather than hierarchical lines of power, most UU's want to sit in circles and come to consensus.

And if you don't like my sexual orientation, gender identity or my eating habits, that's none of your business to control or legislate. Rather than valuing racial, sexual or gender purity, we prize the beauty of diversity. Unlike just about every other religious institution, we think our differences encountered and bridged will build stronger and more resilient communities.

If you want to vote these values, you'll know how to vote.

And ... though your values line up with UU values, one value may "trump" them all as is the case for the Evangelical voter. I came across this striking Internet comment that may speak for many voters whomever they vote for:

So, even though I hate them, I hate their character and I hate their personality, I still think based on the ground realities and circumstances, they would be the best bet for the country, and thereby for the world.

It is not my place to tell you how to vote. You and your conscience must cast the ballot.

What matters most is that you vote on Tuesday.

And then let's get on with our lives!

Benediction

Attachment to opinions, the Buddha warned, creates great suffering.
Refusal to listen to each other, falsely divides us.

Let us learn how to speak and listen respectfully
acknowledging our holy ignorance
honoring the truth of our personal experiences
feeling into our common humanity
and practicing new ways to love beyond opinions.

Go in Peace. Make Peace. Be at Peace.