

Spiritual Survival Guide for an Election Year

A sermon by UUCW member Jeff Browne – March 30, 2008

First Reading

Our first reading is a guide for global leadership from a ditch-digger, ranch hand, singing cowboy, and Unitarian Universalist minister from Waco, Texas, by the name of Robert Fulghum.

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand pile at school.

These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some. Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: the roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that. Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we. And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living. Think what a better world it would be if ... all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess.

Second reading

Our second reading is a from a guide for pragmatic politics written by a 16th century Italian diplomat, political philosopher, musician, poet and playwright by the name of Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli.

A question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? One should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, it is much safer to be feared than loved. Because in general men are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous, and as long as you succeed, they are yours entirely; they will offer you their blood, property, life, and children; but ... they turn against you. And that prince, who, relying entirely on their promises, has neglected other precautions, is ruined; because friendships ... in time of need cannot be relied upon. ... for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails.

Sermon

An Election Year Survivor's Guide

Decision 2008. A time of hope. And the promise of change. And for some of us, a period of disappointment and disillusionment as the universes of idealism and politics collide. With an election this coming Tuesday and again in November, this is a season to appreciate the wisdom of both Robert Fulghum and Machiavelli – because our world is complex enough to accommodate kindergarten philosophy and political gamesmanship.

The dissonance between spirituality and politics has always troubled me, and I am honored to share with you some thoughts I have about it. But I am a policy wonk, not a preacher. So I do so with a lot of humility and trepidation.

I have been a student of divisiveness for 55 years. Tomorrow, March 31st, officially marks the end of my career of learning about politics and policy in school and then as a journalist and these past 13 years running a think tank.

After half a century of “thinking,” I agree that everything I really need to know I learned in kindergarten – as long as there are grown-ups around to take care of me.

For a 60-year-old, I'm pretty up to date on kindergartners. Last year, I had two of them in my house, and the experience of one of them reminded me of why we have politics. Zachary had to deal with bullies. He entered kindergarten small but fearless, full of wonder and energy, and at the end of the year he had been beaten down.

His experience reminded me of a book called the Parable of the Tribes. Its thesis is that once a tribe becomes aggressive – whether in the form of a warring nation or a fellow kindergartner – there are only a few possible responses by all the other tribes: victory, capitulation, defeat or escape. And every one of those choices requires adapting to the ways of power. Indeed, Zachary has adopted the ways of power. As a first grader, he is quite a politician.

Politics are about power. Elections are about power. Or as I learned in college, the authoritative allocation of values. All political questions come down to resources. You have to follow the money.

Spirituality is another matter. It is not about power. In fact, it is about powerlessness. We don't control it, and we don't get to vote to decide whose spirituality rules. So spirituality and politics really don't go together very well.

But we try to combine them anyway. In my case, that happened right after kindergarten. I remember exactly two things I learned in first grade: First, the Lord's Prayer because we recited it every day (in public school); and second: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible with liberty and justice for all”.

Later that year, in 1954, the politicians in Washington, D.C., decided to add the words “Under God” to the pledge in order to show we are God’s chosen country and to distinguish us from the God-less Russians. By second grade, we dispensed with the Lord’s Prayer because in essence we had merged it with the pledge – blurring the line between spirituality and politics.

The United States of America, a political entity, is no place for religion. And I know many of you are very passionate about political issues, and I am too, but I get uncomfortable when politics finds its way into this church.

Our church IS interesting, politically speaking, because our membership is almost exactly evenly split between residents of the most Republican county in the Wisconsin and one of the most Democratic. Some of us are represented in Washington by one of the most conservative congressmen in America, and others by one of the most liberal. And yet we co-exist in the same house of worship. How can that be? Somebody needs to alert Tim Russert.

The cynical view is that it doesn’t really matter who you vote for. I think there’s some truth in that, for three reasons:

First, the candidates tend to be pretty similar (and I’ll explain why in a moment).

Second, elections tend to be hostile to diversity because the majority rules.

And third: Politics are largely an illusion. A game. Like monopoly, or volleyball, or air hockey – except with hot air.

There is both a spiritual and scientific basis for the third point -- the idea that politics are illusion -- blue smoke and mirrors -- like almost everything else.

Over the years I’ve tried, as I know you have, to figure out the mysteries of the universe, and my own current spiritual view is best expressed by the Buddhist monk who said this: “We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When you understand this, you see that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything.”

When I tell some of my friends this is profound, they think I’m nuts; but there is a scientific basis for the idea that what we perceive as reality is really illusion. In the *Dancing Wu Li Masters*, a book about the findings of modern physics, the author describes the current thinking of what is actually inside a single atom, the building block of everything we perceive as reality. In order to conceptualize what matter really is, he suggests, imagine an atom the size of a 14-story building. The nucleus would be the size of a grain of sand. And the electrons traveling around the nucleus can best be described as mathematical probabilities of existence.

In other words, some cutting edge physicists suggest matter is really force fields and energy that has organized itself in a way that we perceive as physical matter. What does that say about our brains, if it turns out gray matter is really an illusion and our minds are

more like force fields inter-connected with one another – perhaps like home computers connected to the Internet.

This actually has something to do with today's topic: politics. The Internet is constantly being invented, constantly changing, like the universe. But political change comes much more slowly, and that is cause for great frustration. We all have political issues we are passionate about. Maybe you feel strongly about gender equity, world peace, racial justice, gay rights, environmental responsibility, gun control – but when the political answers seem obvious, we all wonder why things change so slowly if at all.

The spiritual universe evolves rapidly. Astronomers tell us the earth hurtles through space at 135 miles per second. Since this service began, we have traveled the distance to the moon together, but politically not much has changed. We're still in Brookfield. And the analogy I use to describe the pace of political change is the tectonic plates that form the earth's crust – which move about as fast as our fingernails grow. This is what I remind myself when I wonder why the thoughts of my think tank aren't being implemented as fast as they should be.

But we do have an occasional political earthquake, explosive events that lead to systemic change. Examples would be the 1929 stock market crash that led to social security, the supreme court's Brown vs. the Board of Education and Roe v. Wade decisions, the collapse of the soviet union, and 911.

But systemic political change is exceedingly rare. In politics, the majority generally elects people to keep things the same, not to change things.

Intellectually and spiritually, we know change is healthy and inevitable, but the truth is we are wired to resist change. In fact, resisting change is one of the essential ingredients of survival.

My favorite word is homeostasis, because it explains almost everything about why we are the way we are, and why our political institutions behave the way they do. Over the years, I have often had reporters and others ask me, since I run a think tank: Why aren't we doing a better job educating our kids? Why can't we get our act together on public transportation? Why do we have 254 units of government in metro Milwaukee? And, in a broader context: Why aren't we dealing with global warming? Why don't we provide health care for everybody? Why is one out of every 100 of us in prison? I used to try to come up with intelligent-sounding answers. But the truth is the answer to all of them is "homeostasis."

Homeostasis is a biological term, and it refers to the capacity of all living things to resist influences from external forces. We wouldn't live long without it. An example is the way our body temperature remains constant whether the temperature outside is a hundred degrees or sub-zero. If we get cold, we can put a sweater on, and the political equivalent of that might be a modest increase in the tax rate. But systemic political change is equivalent to taking our skin off, which would be like getting rid of the boundary between Waukesha and Milwaukee counties down the street here.

We are wired to resist change. And we construct our political systems to reflect that resistance. But spirituality is different. There are no artificial boundaries. We're all connected, with each other, with the universe. I think when we talk about a politician who is charismatic; we are experiencing a rare individual who taps into the boundless spirituality within us. Charisma doesn't make a candidate a good political choice necessarily, but it does stir the spirit.

Politically, on the other hand, all candidates tend to be similar. Candidates that advocate for systemic change rarely get anywhere because of homeostasis. That's why we don't seriously consider doing away with the IRS and replacing it with a flat tax, or legalizing drugs and, in the process, emptying some of our prisons.

But I believe there is also a deeper, and darker, reason Senators Clinton, Obama, and McCain differ within a fairly narrow spectrum. The darker reason is that all of them are committed to the preservation of global inequity – for which there is no spiritual justification whatsoever. In order to do that, we need to be concerned about national security.

Nations, after all, are just large tribes. And as Andrew Shmookler described in his Parable of the tribes I mentioned earlier, once a tribe becomes habitually aggressive toward other tribes, all others are eventually forced to adopt the "ways of power." It would be nice if we could heal the deep-seated wounds that drive men to war, which paraphrases the title of another Shmookler book. And it certainly would be consistent with our UU principals. But until we do, we need to acknowledge there are people in the world who want to do us harm.

National security is really about preserving what we have -- homeostasis. I have a series of pictures that illustrates this point. The photographs are portraits of families at their homes in various countries along with the food the family consumes in a week. The American family is surrounded by chips, beer, pizza, McDonald's fries, soda, packages of meat, fresh fruit and vegetables, and so forth, and above the picture is the price they paid for it all: \$342. The portrait of the family from Chad shows a grandmother, a mother, four children, three bags of grain, a bottle of water and a few handfuls of what appear to be vegetables or spices. The cost: \$1.23. For one week. I won't tell you which family looks healthier and happier because that's the subject for another sermon. But the pictures expose a fundamental western hypocrisy. And they may help explain why we often find politics so distasteful: because, in fact, the politics of all of our candidates for president, just like their constituents, are premised on the idea that we are invested in keeping ourselves at the top of the heap.

You might wonder why I dwell on these dark aspects of politics – hypocrisy and the slow pace of change. I do so because I find them comforting, in a sense, even uplifting. They help me appreciate the need for patience and humility. Both are necessary to create the political future without running out of energy and sinking into despair. Moreover, acknowledging the nature of politics helps me see what we have achieved in addition to the work that needs doing. Often we lament that we haven't made any progress on issues like gender equity and racial justice. But all the time we've been saying that, the tectonic

plates have been moving beneath us, and we probably will have a person of color or a woman or both on a major party's ticket this November.

Also, the candidates, and their politics, do differ significantly when it comes to deciding how we distribute our resources and relate to the rest of the world, for example. That's why our votes count.

I don't have a spiritual survival handbook for dealing with the realities of politics, but if I did I think I would turn to the wisdom of the ancient Toltec civilization of Mexico. The Toltecs, similar to the Buddhists, tend to believe that our egos and attachments get in the way of our spiritual connections. So the Toltecs might say something like this about surviving an election year spiritually intact:

First of all, be impeccable with your word. Speak with integrity. Acknowledge the contradictions. We want to do what we learned in kindergarten, but we also know there are fundamentalist extremists who would like to destroy us. So maybe it's okay to be confused, and even a little hypocritical, as long as we don't kid ourselves about it.

Second, the Toltecs might say, don't take things personally. Your neighbors, your fellow UUs, and your spouse are entitled to their opinions. They aren't canceling out your vote to humiliate you. Elections aren't about you. They are about all of us.

Third. Don't make assumptions. Don Miguel Ruiz, the author of the book on Toltec wisdom, says our tendency is to see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear. The way to keep ourselves from making political assumptions is to ask questions. Democrats can act like Republicans, and vice versa. Whoever gets elected may surprise you.

Finally, Toltec wisdom tells us: Do your best. In part, doing your best means integrating your spiritual and political values – and acting on them. It means choosing well. Most people don't choose at all. They don't go to the polls. When I do, even though I've studied public policy and politics, for a living, personally, I use my gut. And that relates to my Buddhist perspective. When we vote with our instincts, the collective conscious speaks, and in that sense, voting creates the future. It is a spiritual act. If you believe in God, then perhaps elections are an expression of God. And if not, maybe your vote gives a voice to the universe.

And there's always the possibility that the universe, and heaven, and earth are the same thing – if and when we can see them from the perspective of the young and innocent.

One of the great political songs of all time is We Shall Overcome, which is about racial discrimination. Back in 1965 the young people added a verse during the freedom marches in Montgomery, Alabama, and it gave the song a new meaning. Those young people taught a lesson to their elders – the older people who had learned to compromise, and be polite, leave things as they were and get along. The verse they sang went this way: “We are not afraid. We are not afraid. We are not afraid today.”

Maybe what we need to overcome -- in this election year 2008 -- is not external. Maybe it is within us: fear. The energy that drains us, weakens our spirit, blocks us from creating a safer, healthier and more humane world.

Fear is the fuel of politics, the soul of the campaign manager, the foundation beneath the halls of Congress, the energy that drives elections, the passion behind stump speeches. And when Jesus told us, according to the Bible, that the kingdom of heaven is within us, what he didn't say is that political instincts, especially fear, also are within us. Fear and peace. Politics and heaven. Pragmatism and idealism. Always in tension. Always within us. Especially in election years.

I wonder if the key to overcoming our basest political instincts, and the key to reaching heaven on earth, is hidden inside the universe of the child. Because kindergartners are integrated; the rest of us are conflicted with political and emotional energy.

And this, of course, brings us back to Robert Fulghum, who reminds us wisdom comes not from graduate school, and certainly not from campaign ads, but from the sand pile. In kindergarten, we couldn't vote, but we learned to share and play fair. That's where we learned to be aware of wonder. It was in kindergarten where we learned what to do when we go out in the world, to stick together.

And that's where we learned to trust that all is right with the universe, trust that the place to find our spiritual center is not on CNN -- but in the fearless soul of a child.

Amen