

In the Wake of an Election

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

11 November 2012

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

frederickuu.org

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

—Abraham Lincoln, “First Inaugural Address”

Many congregations have the tradition of an Election Sermon on the Sunday before Election Day. In all the tension, excitement, and hype prior to an election, reflecting thoughtfully about how our religious values inform our engagement with the democratic process seems appropriate.

In contrast, I do not know of many congregations that have a tradition of a Post-Election Sermon. But perhaps a few words are in order this morning in the wake of Election 2012. My interest is not in partisanship, but in reflecting on ‘what happened’ and ‘where do we go from here’ in light of our Unitarian Universalist tradition.

Unitarian Universalists care about how to create *unity* amidst diversity. But as I studied the Electoral Map of our country on Tuesday night and Wednesday, the divisions in our country remain stark with a large swath of Red States cutting across significant patches of Blue States. The words that came to mind as I looked at this visual representation of our electorate were from Abraham Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address. Lincoln took the oath of office for his first term as the sixteenth President of the United States on March 4, 1861. But only weeks earlier, Jefferson Davis had been inaugurated as President of the Confederate States of America. The first shots of what would become The American Civil War were not to be fired until the next month’s assault on Fort Sumter in South Carolina, but in early March a newly inaugurated President Lincoln spoke a plea for reconciliation. He said,

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart

and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

The newly-reelected President Obama sounded a similar note of reconciliation at the end of his acceptance speech early Wednesday morning. He said,

I believe we can seize this future together because we are not as divided as our politics suggest. We're not as cynical as the pundits believe. We are greater than the sum of our individual ambitions, and we remain more than a collection of red states and blue states. We are and forever will be the United States of America.

At the same time, as President Lincoln discovered and as President Obama's first term has demonstrated, calling for unity is easier than the often frustrating work of actually bringing "one out of many" — to which our motto "*e pluribus unum*" aspires. And if President Obama's latest "chorus of the Union" is to be more than mere rhetoric, "the better angels of our nature will need to emerge.

In the wake of this election, however, there is evidence that one place in which the better angels of our nature continue to emerge is in the increasing support in our country for same-sex marriage. With the passage of Question 6 in Maryland, same-sex marriages will be able to be legally celebrated in this and other sanctuaries across the state no later than January 4, 2013. (Happy New Year!) And the final tally was close enough that arguably **the difference in passage was made through the involvement of individuals and groups such as the UU Legislative Ministry of Maryland (uulmmd.org)** in phone banking, working the polls, and having simple humane conversations. The passage of this referendum reaffirms the critical work for social change that many of you have been and continue to do. Thank you.

We should also celebrate that Maine and Washington passed similar measures. As president of the Unitarian Universalist Association Peter Morales said on Wednesday,

these victories, along with the defeat of the discriminatory anti-marriage amendment in Minnesota, clearly indicate that more and more Americans realize that **the freedom to marry strengthens families, protects children, and ensures**

the basic rights of citizenship for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender couples.¹

On a related note of inclusion, on Tuesday, the citizens of Wisconsin elected our nation's first openly lesbian Senator, Tammy Baldwin. Our congregation has for many years been a part of the Unitarian Universalist Association's "Welcoming Congregation Program" to promote and celebrate the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender members. And **we should celebrate the ways these inclusive values are increasingly found in the wider culture.**

Of similar of significance, especially given the focus in this congregation and in the Unitarian Universalist Association, in the past year on Immigration Reform, "Question 4" in Maryland supporting the DREAM Act also won broad support.² The passage of both the DREAM Act and Marriage Equality remind me of the final line of the sermon I preached here in early September on Immigration Justice: **"May you be blessed us with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in the world so that together we can do what others claim cannot be done."**

Much work remains to be done to reach the lofty goal of our Sixth Principle of "world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all," but it is important to celebrate the vital victories along the way. **When love wins, when peace prevails, and when the marginalized are included, we need to pause and savor that moment.**

From the perspective of Unitarian Universalism, which values the wisdom of all the world's religions, it is further noteworthy that, on Tuesday, Hawaii elected our nation's first Buddhist senator, Mazie Hirono. Hirono is also the first Asian-American woman elected to the

¹ Peter Morales, "UUA President Applauds Marriage Popular Vote" (November 7, 2012), available at <http://www.uua.org/news/pressroom/pressreleases/280924.shtml>.

² For more on the recent involvement of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick with Immigration Justice, see Carl Gregg, "En La Lucha: (Dis)covery, (Im)migration, and Social Justice" (September 2, 2012), available at http://www.frederickuu.org/sermons/en_la_lucha.pdf. On Questions 4 and 6, also see "With Maryland ballot measures, voters do the unprecedented — twice," available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/with-maryland-ballot-measures-voters-do-the-unprecedented--twice/2012/11/07/9d4a851e-2908-11e2-96b6-8e6a7524553f_story.html.

Senate.³ In addition, the 2nd Congressional of Hawaii elected our first Hindu member of Congress, Tulsi Gabbard. Significantly on this Veteran's Day, our new Hindu-American Representative-elect Gabbard is an Iraq War veteran. These moves toward religious pluralism in our nation at large are significant parallels to our Unitarian Universalist practice of drawing from not one source, but Six Sources in shaping our life together.

Along these lines, notice how Representative-elect Gabbard describes herself religiously. She says,

I identify as a Hindu. However, I am much more into spirituality than I am religious labels. In that sense, I am a Hindu in the mold of the most famous Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, who is my hero and role model. [I] was raised in a multicultural, multirace, multifaith family [that allowed me] to spend a lot of time studying and contemplating upon both the Bhagavad-Gita and the teachings of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. My attempts to work for the welfare of others and the planet is the core of my spiritual practice. Also, every morning I take time to remember my relationship with God through the practice of yoga meditation and reading verses from the Bhagavad-Gita. From the perspective of the

³ "Buddhist, Hindu make history in new Congress," available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/buddhist-hindu-make-history-in-new-congress/2012/11/07/feaebab2-2923-11e2-aaa5-ac786110c486_story.html. *The Washington Post* has noted other significant moments of increased religious pluralism in Congress:

In 2006, Rep. Keith Ellison of Minnesota was the first Muslim to serve in either the House or the Senate; two years later, Democratic Rep. Andre Carson of Indiana became the second Muslim in Congress. "Other small religious groups started serving in Congress more than a century earlier. **The first Jewish member arrived in 1845,** when Lewis Charles Levin of the American Party began representing Pennsylvania in the House," according a press statement from the Pew Forum. "**The first Mormon in Congress, John Milton Bernhisel, began serving in 1851,** after Utah was officially recognized as a territory. California Democrat Dalip Singh Saund, **the first and so far only Sikh to serve in Congress, served three terms starting in 1957.**" (Emphasis mine.)

For the full article, see: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/under-god/post/hindu-american-elected-to-congress/2012/11/07/cffcbbba8-2908-11e2-bab2-eda299503684_blog.html.

Bhagavad-Gita, the spiritual path I have described here is known as karma yoga and bhakti yoga.⁴

As I read this description, I can't help thinking of that old UU slogan, "You might be a Unitarian Universalist and not know it!" Said differently, I celebrate the ways that Gabbard is one of an **increasing number of people whose values — either implicitly or explicitly — resonate with the Principles and Sources of Unitarian Universalism.**

We Unitarian Universalists also value *reason and science* equally as much as the wisdom of the world's religious traditions. And from that angle, three weeks ago, I said from this pulpit that — irrespective of who I think should win the White House — my educated guess, based largely on statistician Nate Silver's "Five Thirty Eight" blog for *The New York Times*, was that President Obama would win a second term. Since the run-up to the 2008 election, I, like so many others, have found Nate Silver to be an indispensable source for separating the "Signal" from the "Noise" in the incessant flurry of polling data.⁵ Now that the results are in, we can see that,

In addition to picking the winner in all 50 states — besting his 49 out of 50 slate in 2008 — Silver was also the closest among the aggregators to picking the two candidates' popular vote percentages. All told, he missed Obama's total...by just four-tenths of a percentage point...and Romney's 48 percent by just three-tenths of a point.... [In 11 swing states] Silver was closest to the final margins among the candidates in seven of them and also had the best overall record, missing by an average of just 1.46 points in the 11 states.

On Election night, as the emerging results continued to show Silver's predictions to be impressively correct, one response I saw on Twitter was, "This may be a good time to concede that Nate Silver is, [without] any shadow of a doubt, a wizard, and I bow to his nerdy wisdom." Silver's own response was, "This is probably a good time to link to my book." More seriously, journalist Jonah Goldberg tweeted, "If Nate Silver is right, does this also mean that the climate is, in fact, changing, and that the earth is more than 6,000 years old?" **Silver's nonpartisan**

⁴ Representative-elect Gabbard's self description is from Mark Oppenheimer, "Politicians Who Reject Labels Based on Religion" (November 9, 2012), available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/10/us/politics/politicians-who-speak-of-religion-in-unaccustomed-ways.html>.

⁵ Nate Silver, *The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail-but Some Don't*.

correct predictions are another in a long line of victories for science, empirically-based predictions, and evidence-based belief systems.

~ ~ ~

Now, having noted some of the many reasons that some of you have been celebrating this past week, I also recognize that some of you may well have important reasons — from the personal to the political — that have not left you in a celebratory mood on this Post-Election Sunday. And having quoted President Lincoln earlier about the challenge of allowing the “better angels of our nature” to emerge, allow me to say a few words about the relationship between Unitarian Universalism and Conservatism.

Admittedly, Unitarian Universalism is often known as a “Liberal Religion.” But **Liberal Religion is *not* synonymous with the Democratic Party.** As I’ve said before, the liberal turn in religion is the move *from* a topdown hierarchal authority *to* an emphasis on personal experience: what you to be true based on your firsthand experience. And sometimes “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” leads toward the cultivation of Conservative values.

Indeed, at this past year’s Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, there was a workshop about conservative Unitarian Universalists.⁶ At that workshop The Rev. Nancy McDonald-Ladd, the minister of River Road UU in Bethesda, made the important point that to assume or desire that all UUs are liberal would be:

mirroring the exact political partisanship and brokenness present in the world outside our doors, and are we not called — as faithful, courageous people — to something higher than mirroring the worst of the world around us?

More than 58 million U.S. citizens cast a vote for Governor Romney. That’s a significant portion of our electorate that must be taken seriously. As even that classic liberal John Stuart Mill said about the importance of Conservatives, “**A party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life.**”⁷

⁶ Sonja L. Cohen, “Conservative UUs call for inclusivity” (June 23, 2012), available at <http://blogs.uuworld.org/ga/2012/06/23/conservative-uus-call-for-inclusivity>.

⁷ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (2003/1859), 113.

Those of you who read my sermon manuscripts online may recognize those last two passages, which were added to the manuscript versions of my last two sermons respectively, but I cut them out of version delivered aloud due to time constraints. However, as I've listened this past week to both the agony and the ecstasy in response to this year's election, it seems important to emphasize that Lincoln's call to the "better angels of our nature" is a **challenge not only for Conservatives to be more open-minded and inclusive, but also for Liberal individualists to recognize the lessons they can learn from Conservatives such as community and tradition.**

~ ~ ~

There is much more to be said about the better angels of our nature that will be needed to create a truly "Purple America" that blends the best of "Red State" and "Blue State" values, but for now I would like to say a few words about going forward in the wake of this or any election, whether your candidates or issues won or lost.⁸ As I reflect on the frantic energy, massive tension, and more than \$6 billion spent in the build up to this year's Election Day, words came to mind from Thomas Merton's 1968 book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Merton was both a cloistered Trappist monk and a person deeply committed to social justice. His immersion in contemplative prayer gave him perspective that many activists on the frontlines of social change came to find invaluable. Merton wrote:

"There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the idealist...most easily succumbs: activism and over-work. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes [his or her] work.... because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful." (86)

There are many reasons to be deeply grateful for all the activists in this election cycle who helped make this world a more peaceful, just, and compassionate place. But now in the wake of

⁸ For more about how to live together as a "Purple America," see Carl Gregg, "Election 2012, Part 3: The Righteous Mind and the Democratic Process" (November 4, 2012), available at http://www.frederickuu.org/sermons/Righteous_Mind.pdf.

the Election, Merton's words invite us to examine the ways in which even our best-intended activism and activities can sometimes be unintentionally violent to ourselves and to those around us given the frenzy of our overcommitments. Even more pointedly, he challenges us that, at a certain point, overwork rather than accomplishing more results, tragically tends to "neutralize our work...because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful."

At this time of year, our pagan friends remind us that our recent celebration of Halloween is not only a time for dressing up in costume and handing out candy, but also it is Samhain — one of the eight spokes on the Pagan Wheel of the Year — halfway between the fall equinox and the winter solstice. We are a little more than halfway between the days of equal-part light and darkness and the upcoming Winter Solstice, the darkest day of the year. As you feel the wind blow on these colder, darker days, can you feel the Wheel of the Year turning?

In the wake of an Election, perhaps an invitation for you in the darker days of this coming winter is to discern the ways in which you have unintentionally "allowed yourself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit to too many projects." In Merton's words, "to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence." The question becomes, "What is really yours to do?"

In a few moments, I will ring the bell, and we will enter into a minute of contemplative silence. As you listen to the bell's reverberation, I invite you to be present to what emerges as yours to do in this present moment. Perhaps you will feel led to spend a few moments quietly *savoring* one of the landmark moves toward "Standing on the Side of Love" in this year's Election. Or perhaps you will feel led to discern *what is yours to let go of* in the wake of this Election that your life may be less frenzied. Or perhaps you will be led to simply be fully present to this present moment.