

**“Religion and Politics and Unitarian Universalism”**

**Vanessa R. Southern, preaching**

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*(A Services Auction Sermon made possible by Joe Parsons)*

**Opening Reading:** Excerpt from “On the Pulse of Morning” by Maya Angelou

On the eve of the election we open with an excerpt of the poem read at the 1993 presidential inauguration. It speaks in part to the inheritance that is each of ours as citizens of this nation.

Each of you, descendant of some passed  
On traveler, has been paid for.

You, who gave me my first name, you  
Pawnee, Apache and Seneca, you  
Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then  
Forced on bloody feet, left me to the employment of  
Other seekers--desperate for gain,  
Starving for gold.

You, the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Scot ...  
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought  
Sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare  
Praying for a dream.

Here, root yourselves beside me.

I am the Tree planted by the River,  
Which will not be moved.

I, the Rock, I the River, I the Tree  
I am yours--your Passages have been paid.

Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need  
For this bright morning dawning for you.

History, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, and if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again.

Lift up your eyes upon  
The day breaking for you.

Give birth again  
To the dream.

Women, children, men,  
Take it into the palms of your hands.

Mold it into the shape of your most  
Private need. Sculpt it into  
The image of your most public self.  
Lift up your hearts  
Each new hour holds new chances  
For new beginnings.

**Second Reading:** From "I Have a Dream", by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered 28 August 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C.

"Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of

honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice."

### **Sermon: "Religion and Politics and Unitarian Universalism"**

I'm not sure what to say this week, what to be say that hasn't already been said beautifully, with pathos and clarity; what hasn't already been said in photos of women and men weeping in church aisles or out in great open fields where they gathered. Even those whose vote didn't sway the election the way they'd hoped, even our outgoing president, head of his party, seemed to get that this was a momentous week, a moment in history unparalleled, blotting out (as one blogger wrote) the specter of 9/11 for once, with triumph and not despair. The cover of the New York Times is going for hundreds of dollars on eBay, a keepsake for generations that want their kids to remember that they were there when the tides of racism changed in some clear, remarkable and for so long seemingly impossible way.

In Kenya the number one song is a reggae tune by Jamaican artist Cocoa Tea called "Barak Obama". The world, it seems, is celebrating with us and with each other. It's not just black Americans who rejoice but white Americans who have held such painfully unredeemable history in their hands for so long, and the world rejoices. The Bank of Justice, as King called it, is not bankrupt; the great vaults of opportunity have made good on one long-held and important promissory note. It is something to be proud of no matter which side of the political aisle we stand upon.

And hope is out there in force taking all kinds of forms. Something about this man inspires hope – his intelligence, his equanimity, his unshakeable call to end divisions of any kind. Last weekend I was at the UU church in Concord, Massachusetts, the quintessential "church on the green"; the center of life geographically in that town. And a white haired, buttoned up and buttoned down, respectable New England man told me at coffee hour in hushed tones and only if I promised to tell no one else in that church, that he feels and admits in quiet moments to himself the sense he has that this man, Obama, has been sent by God. One tireless local campaign organizer is asked by a friend of mine how he has kept

it up. His only answer is that he thinks he knows how Jesus' disciples must have felt when Jesus said to them, "Follow me." In Ramallah, on the West Bank, a sketch stood at easy reach for days without being marred graffiti or being torn down, a sketch of Barak Obama holding an olive branch.

Whether you think the best man for the job won or not, no one can deny that there is remarkable healing going on in the wake of this election and there is hope coming alive, hope with an almost religious bent. And we need a little hope.

We need hope and the promise of some healing. Democrat and Republican you and I have watched for eight years as cherished cornerstones of our national ideals (which are not simply political ideals but moral ideals) have been chipped away at or put in cold storage. We have some serious accounting to do, some resurrection of our Good Friday selves.

- We must all answer, after all, for the fact that we have become a nation that finds just cause in using harsh interrogation techniques that many believe are tantamount to torture... unless you believe that anything short of "organ failure" is a legitimate standard for getting answers to our burning national questions;
- We must all answer for the fact that we have denied so many people sitting in secret prisons the right of Habeas Corpus – the right of protection against unjust imprisonment -- a right not only enshrined in our constitution, but a bedrock principle of international law for over 330 years and we have denied basic human rights under the Geneva Convention to many people we have imprisoned, rights that our Supreme Court has stated, are incumbent upon all civilized nations;
- We must answer for over 4000 American ribbons hanging outside, each with the name of a man or woman upon them who is no longer alive, and for the tens of thousands maimed who have no ribbons and the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who suffered the same fate; let alone the national treasury depleted by the billions, almost trillion to pay for this war.

We have a lot to account for. It has not been a great chapter in our history. Moreover, with the economic crisis it looks like a tough chapter ahead, but there is hope and healing afoot.

No matter what side of the political aisle you found yourself this election, the record turnout of voters was heartening. At the very least it shows a reclamation of faithful stewardship of our nation, and faith in our democratic system, when voter apathy in other elections has spoken of resignation or even a lack of concern.

This is a political victory our faith can celebrate, in part because our faith has always taken democracy seriously. Eighty plus years ago Unitarian women like Susan B. Anthony fought hard for the right to vote; and their congregations did too. The second woman's rights convention held at our own First Unitarian church in Rochester, NY. We ordained women in the Universalist and Unitarian movements in the 1860's, the first denominations to do so and long before any others would follow. It would be long too before the world would put such faith and authority in the hands of women in the form of a right to vote.

Long before that, our movement was as passionate about the rights of non-whites, for the same reasons. Created by God they believed all men had worth and the rights implied in that worth. That belief alone inspired Unitarian radical abolitionist Theodore Parker (in a story that is one of my favorites and one you have heard before) whose Community Church in Boston weekly drew thousands to hear his message, to harbor runaway slaves in that church's basement. Parker then preached weekly with a loaded pistol in his pulpit lest anyone come on Sunday morning to try and enforce the Fugitive Slave Law thinking mistakenly that at that time the preacher might be sufficiently distracted!

A hundred years later there was James Reeb, minister of All Souls, in Washington DC who marched in Selma with a group of UU ministers so large it outnumbered any other denomination. Reeb was killed in that march and Martin Luther King, Jr. preached his eulogy. And there was Unitarian Civil Rights activist, Viola Liuzzo was also killed in the march. Securing the vote for black Americans was part of this long journey to have our religious beliefs in human dignity and equality writ into our political and social system.

So it was heartening to hear that at 6 AM in Virginia, the local high school where a friend needed to go to vote had its parking lot already filled and the Safeway lot across the street was almost at capacity too. It was heartening to hear that there were more early ballots cast in Colorado in this election than entire ballots cast in the last presidential election. It was powerful to see this right taken as seriously as did the black men who walked the gamut of abuse for decades to get to the polls on election day to cast their hard-won votes; to be taken as seriously as the imprisoned suffragettes who dreamed of that vote as they endured brutal forced-feeding to end their non-violent hunger strikes that sought to bend power to justice. It was wonderful to see a generation of young men and women who will probably never have a ground line in their homes, and who will find their mates online, go to the polls in an old fashioned ritual that they didn't fight to secure or protect, but the

importance of which was reclaimed because someone or something convinced them in this election it mattered that they vote.

Church and state are separate for good reason. Unitarian forefathers like Thomas Jefferson feared opening the door to creating a theocracy like the ones they had fled. Church and state were made separate, but it was never intended that their efforts would be *divorced* from one another. The values at the heart of our political leanings are so often, as they should be, at the heart of our religious lives too. And so watching the political life of America come alive felt very close to watching it's heart come alive, it's faith – however that faith gets named or labeled.

On Wednesday night at our post-election pot luck dinner and discussion we asked folks to name what values were at the heart of their political leanings and where in their lives, in what experiences, those values were rooted. In my group I heard talk of a childhood trip to the segregated south and the commitment to equality and fairness that took root in that moment in time. I heard talk of an experience of discrimination for mental illness and the commitment to stand against discrimination of any kind that that experience engendered. When we shared as a large group the values of moving toward peace, of justice for all, of the ability of all people to have equal opportunity to share in the fruits of hard labor and the promise of education, and the dignity that the working man be accorded and that they not be so disproportionate from his Chief Executive – these were all values people named as cherished, rooted in their personal stories and experiences, ones they wanted enshrined not just in their private lives but in the nation to whom they give their allegiance.

Patriotism is a love of country, and finally this week I felt that love come out of its hiding place. People seemed willing to risk on it once more.

“Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need,” the poet wrote, “For this bright morning dawning for you... Lift up your eyes upon/The day breaking for you/Give birth again/To the dream.”

Our faith has always taken its heart's commitments, forged in that unfettered freedom to challenge inherited truths that is the hallmark of religious liberalism, and tried to make those truths part of the lived reality for all people. Religious truths, you might say, were our engine and politics was one of the many wheels on the vehicle that would get us where we wanted to go. That translation of core values to political party or leader was never part of the dictation we took or gave.

The point was not to live walk in lock step, but to move together finding the way to enshrine our truths in the sacred chambers of political and social institutions and so make it possible for other to live those truths.

It's time to do that work in earnest again. It is time to dust off the core values at the heart of our political ideals. It is time to risk faith again in a nation's dreams for itself and its leader; time to risk disappointment, even. It is time to pull determination out of the closet. Time, as Obama rightly recalled us, to prepare to wrap ourselves in sacrifice for greater good. What's broken, I expect and I expect you expect, will not get fixed without some pain. But it is unspeakably lovely to begin to feel our nation being healed of some ancient and awful broken promises to itself, and it is lovely to dream again our biggest and most enduring shared dreams, and to have a whole world hope and dream with us.

“Lift up your hearts  
Each hour holds new chances  
For new beginnings.”

The work of our hearts awaits us once more in the world.