

SINGING OUR “BROKEN HALLELUJAHS”
THE PROPHETIC IMPERATIVE IN A MESSY WORLD

Richard S. Gilbert – Gould Discourse, Syracuse, NY - MMUUS – April 1, 2017

I couldn't help but notice that today's presidential forum and the Gould Discourse have been scheduled – quite unintentionally I'm sure - for April Fool's Day. Which reminds me of the probably apocryphal story in which one child asked a Unitarian Universalist friend what he planned to do on April Fool's Day. The little boy responded, "We don't believe in April Fool's Day in our family; we're Unitarian Universalists." However, apparently *we do* – which is an appropriate preface for our response to a world turned upside down on November 8, 2016.

That November Fool's Day election has done more than upend the political world. It has challenged our very souls. Its meaning is far more than political. There are also moral, spiritual and religious meanings in what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen. What are those meanings and what are we to do with them?

I chose the title of this discourse from a haunting phrase in the late Leonard Cohen's iconic hymn-like song *Hallelujah*. Of it he wrote: "It explains that many kinds of hallelujahs do exist, and all the perfect and broken hallelujahs have equal value."¹

I think Cohen caught the spirit of the age and suggested our response with the phrase “broken Hallelujah.” While we may wonder what Cohen meant, it is more important what that phrase may mean for us. How do we sing our “broken Hallelujahs” in a troubled time?

Hallelujah is a Hebrew word from the Psalms, meaning "praise Yahweh." It was a religious exultation, probably used to encourage participation in the liturgy. Later, it became a cry of joy; the Jews of Alexandria sang it after being saved from annihilation by the Egyptians.² While we are probably not in as dire straits as the Hebrew people were, many of us are distraught, discouraged and depressed at the ascension of our American Pharaoh.

During last fall's quadrennial ritual of democracy I was reminded of the Fifth Principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association - promoting “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” For us, democracy – the participation of people in the decisions that impact their lives – is a religious value!

Unitarians and Universalists have always been “up to their steeples in politics,” applying our faith to society – what I call the prophetic imperative. Twice last fall I delivered an “election sermon,” after a Massachusetts tradition that existed from the colonial period to 1884.

As historian Conrad Wright observed: “In the decades prior to the Revolution, the preachers gave instruction in the political theory of John Locke, and thereby prepared public opinion for revolt.” I won't go quite that far this afternoon.

Which brings me to the question: what is going on here – politically, culturally, socially, religiously, spiritually? We walk in troubled times. I believe the political events of November 2016 and following will be added to the litany of mistakes enumerated by historian Barbara Tuchman in her book, *The March of Folly*: from Troy to Vietnam. Fill in the blank.

Over my 55 years of ministry I have tried to be prophetic, not political; that is, trying to speak truth to power from the pulpit, while attempting not to become overly or overtly partisan in my pronouncements. But religion and politics do mix. As proof I share the story of the Republican who on his death bed changed his political registration to Democrat. When in heaven, he was asked why: “Better to lose one of them than one of us.”

I have tried to be an equal opportunity critic. There were hard words for Lyndon Johnson over Vietnam; I criticized Bill Clinton, not only for his sexual peccadilloes but also for his “ending welfare as we know it,” which did not end poverty; and I critiqued Hillary Clinton for her “basket of deplorables” remark which contradicts our belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every person. My intent as a minister was to drop the ethical plumb line like the prophet Amos no matter where it falls.

Therefore, what I am about to say about our President is not out of the ordinary – at least for me. Given what I know about Unitarian Universalists, I feel confident there were many who voted for Mr. Trump – perhaps out of dislike for Hillary Clinton; perhaps because promised tax cuts might stimulate business; perhaps out a simple despairing desire for change, perhaps because they thought him the better candidate. These factors, plus a fear of diversity, of the other; our archaic presidential election process; FBI intrusions, and Russian meddling created a “perfect storm” that gave Trump an Electoral College victory despite his popular vote defeat.

Not long after the election, my wife Joyce and I attended the theater showing of Verdi’s opera *Nabuko*, about the Babylonian Captivity of the Hebrews in the 6th century B.C.E. At one point, Nebechunezer (Nabuko), in a spasm of megalomania, declared, “I am not a king; I am God,” to which an elderly woman sitting near us proclaimed, “Just like Trump.”

Seldom have I sensed such personal distaste for a candidate. Whatever your politics you must wonder how he could talk the way he did about refugees, Muslims, Mexicans, judges, the media, and belittle opponents as “little Marco,” “lyin’ Ted,” “crooked Hillary” and assorted other “losers,” to use his term.

And how could he say that civil rights hero John Lewis, bloodied and beaten at Selma, hadn’t done anything more than talk – this on Martin Luther King weekend? How could he get away with his attitudes and actions toward women? “When you’re powerful you can get away with anything.” How could he brag he could go into Times Square and shoot someone, yet maintain the ardent support of his followers?

Despite all this, the “family values” religious right overwhelmingly supported him. In the words of one observer, this was an “Amazing Disgrace.” We might simply drop the word “religious” from that designation. Biblically-based people should know it is not “Two Corinthians” but Second Corinthians; that “pride goeth before a fall,” that “he who exalts himself will be humbled.”

I cringe at the egotism of a man who claimed he could successfully run his business and the country at the same time. “I am the only one who could do it, but I won’t.” I remember another supremely confident leader. “The State, it is I.” “L’etat, C’est Moi.” Louis XIV (1638-1715). Mr. Trump is clearly a legend in his own mind.

Given his background Trump’s values are not surprising. He grew up in Marble Collegiate Church and heard the preaching of Norman Vincent Peale. Peale’s famous book *The Power of Positive Thinking* grew out of Dale Carnegie with his *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. And then Trump inherited millions from his father.

But all of our presidents have had character flaws. I might even overlook them in the incumbent but for the “slash and burn” policies that he embraces. We might ask to what period does Mr. Trump refer when he speaks of “making American great again”? The good old days were not so good when Jim Crow ruled.

And what about his “American first” mantra. Arthur Guiterman wrote: “Providence, that watches over children, drunkards and fools, with silent miracles and other esoterica, continue to suspend the ordinary rules and take care of the United States of America.”

I must protest the fear-mongering over terrorism. After all, since 2001, 118 people have been killed by terrorist attacks perpetrated by Muslim-Americans, while more than 230,000 Americans have been murdered – by fellow non-Muslim Americans. We have zero-tolerance for terrorism while touting an OK Corral culture of open carry, stand your ground and worship the Second Amendment.

And what of domestic terrorism and hate crimes. Did you know that on February 27 of this year the doors of the Fourth Universalist Church in New York City were defaced with engraved swastikas? While we cannot blame Mr. Trump for all this, the climate he has helped to create has unleashed unprecedented hate crimes. Who was it who said “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”?

And how are we to understand a wall to keep out undesirables, paid for by Mexico? Chatting with some Canadians in Niagara on the Lake early last fall, I jokingly asked if they were thinking of a wall to keep out Americans should Trump win. They were, and it is ironic that thousands of immigrants in the U.S. are now fleeing to Canada to escape persecution and prosecution here. Here refugees are refused, foreign students think twice about coming, tourism is down. The Lady in New York harbor lifts her torch and weeps.

We are Unitarian UNIVERSALISTS, whose history tells us all are saved by a loving God. But I am afraid in this case we must ask God to do some “extreme vetting” in the case of our President – or else pray for a character transplant! I affirm “repeal and replace” but for Election 2016. Unfortunately, there are no do-overs. Nonetheless, my Universalist love still embraces Donald J. Trump.

In view of all this I conclude that what we are witnessing is not the reincarnation of fascism, but instead the rise of the “cult of Trump.” In cults, the leader commands the undying loyalty of his followers no matter what he might do. There seems little point in trying to have conversation with his most ardent members, for they are “true believers,” locked into a point of view that neither reason nor facts can reach. I’m afraid I’m with the subject of an obituary in the *New York Times*, which concluded, “In lieu of flowers, do not vote for Donald Trump.”

We, who presume to follow a reasonable religion, are spiritually challenged. Reason no longer seems to be the dominant theme in our society; people react with their guts, not their brains – and this bewilders us. In vast parts of our nation the Enlightenment is dead. Truth has become not what we know for sure, but what is up for negotiation. There seems to be a “war on science” as millions deny the preponderate view of scientists on global warming and our human role in it. Truth seems to be wrapped in a fog of “fake news” and “alternative truth.”

Compassion appears to be out of vogue. The president’s draconian budget rejects any idea that the budget is a moral document. It cruelly defunds crucial programs which often benefit the very people who elected him. Most have yet to discover what havoc it would wreak upon the nation. Many are simply ignorant of basic facts. For example, his proposal to cut foreign aid brings an enthusiastic response from fiscal hawks. However, Americans, when asked how much of the federal budget goes to foreign aid, respond with an average 31%. The real answer is less than 1%. That is akin to the classic response of one woman who believes in limited government: “Keep the government out of my Medicare.”

Fifteen years ago Trump said he was for universal health care and endorsed a single-payer system like Canada’s,³ and last September he told *60 Minutes* that his health-care plan would take care of “everybody.”

Yet he wants to replace the Affordable Care Act. On May 15, 2015, he tweeted: “I was the first and only GOP presidential candidate to state there will be no cuts to Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.” But repealing Obamacare would drastically cut Medicaid. I, too, want to replace Obamacare – with single payer universal health insurance. Good luck with that!

At one time a defender of Planned Parenthood, he now wants it defunded; he has said women who have had abortions “should be punished.” Emerson warned us: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” but a little consistency would be helpful. I wonder, in the words of Gertrude Stein, if “there is any there there.” Here we have a moral compass in which magnetic north wanders all over the map. Sad!

We are also ethically challenged by what is happening to our nation. We religious liberals have been schooled in love and compassion in human relations. Behold House Speaker Paul Ryan presenting a health care bill that would end insurance coverage for millions. Or Vice-President Mike Pence who cast the deciding vote to permit states to defund Planned Parenthood, which has prevented more abortions than any “pro-life” group. Here is James Ballentine, chief lobbyist of the American Bankers Association, at a recent meeting of 1500 bankers in Washington, DC: “I don’t want a seat at the table. I want the table.”⁴ A “survival of the fittest” ethic has been set loose in our land. Tragic!

Now lest we be so arrogant as to suppose we Unitarian Universalists have a patent on compassion, I share this vignette. Fellow UU Chuck Collins inherited considerable wealth from his family’s Oscar Mayer Wiener fortune. He decided to give it away, much to the consternation of his conservative father. With Bill Gates, Sr., Chuck advocated for the inheritance tax and other progressive economic policies. An interview with him in the UU World prompted a letter from a UU businessman from Arkansas:

“Who does Collins think created that society and economic system? The answer is people like me. I haven’t taken anything from the system; I have added to the system. Collins seems to be saying that I should be paying to participate in the system, that my adding to it isn’t enough. I don’t believe I owe the system anything. Collins asks why the huge gaps in income and wealth aren’t more of an issue. The simple reason is that most folks think that if they made it, they should be able to keep it. They know that if they ever make it, they will want to keep it.”⁵

Senator Elizabeth Warren, as if in response, spoke up for the “interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” – you may have heard the term. She said, “There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own – nobody.... Now look, you built a factory and turned it into something terrific or a great idea. God bless, keep a big hunk of it. But I want to be clear. You moved your goods to market on the roads that the rest of us paid for.

“You hired workers that the rest of us paid to educate. You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for....Part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.”⁶ We need to be able to frame the issues as well as the feisty senator from Massachusetts.

Which brings us to the question: What shall we do? Do you remember troubadour Ric Masten’s classic song, “Stand Up and Sing a Song, ‘Cause We’re Going Over the Falls”? Well, I don’t think we’re going over the falls, though it is a precarious journey. Admittedly, I am a bit frightened at what lies ahead. Arrogance, slogans, tweets are not especially helpful in a complicated time. Simple thinking in a complex world is a recipe for disaster.

I look for little signals that all will be well. There is the Chinese ideogram for crisis – a two-part symbol – danger and opportunity. We have both in spades. We are simultaneously in unprecedented danger and unequalled opportunity. We have spiritual as well as social and political work to do.

The first thing we do is try to discern the times. That I have tried to do in responding to my rhetorical question: what is going on here?

The second thing we must do is not despair. My late friend and colleague at Cornell United Religious work, Daniel Berrigan, appearing on campus a few years ago, was asked if he wasn’t discouraged. He said, prophetically, “Despair is a luxury beyond my means.” Despair, doubt, discouragement constitute a self-

fulfilling prophecy. While I am not optimistic about the next few years – I don't expect things to magically improve – I am hopeful – meaning I intend to do something to help repair a broken world. I agree with a cartoon figure in sackcloth and ashes, walking down the street carrying a sign which read: "The world is not coming to an end, therefore we must suffer along and learn to cope."

We are also helped by Barack Obama in his wise post-election address. "Progress doesn't follow a straight line. It zigs and zags, and sometimes it moves forward and sometimes it moves backward or even sideways. I am a firm believer in the direction of justice and more prosperity and more freedom, and more inclusion, and the reason it happens is because of people like you." Theodore Parker wrote, and Martin Luther King said, "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." But Richard S. Gilbert says, "The bending of the moral arc toward justice is not automatic; it is we who must do the bending - and it is hard work."

My hope is in part anchored in history. Historian William Kornhauser in *The Politics of Mass Society* argued that Adolf Hitler triumphed because there were few intermediate groups between Der Fuhrer and the people. Hitler controlled everything by direct radio contact with discouraged and disorganized masses. But what Nazi Germany lacked, we have in spades – in what we call civil society – the ACLU, the NAACP, Black Lives Matter, Common Cause, Public Citizen, Planned Parenthood, the Sierra Club, among others, and yes, the religious communities which can become what Martin Luther King called "the conscience of the nation."

I remember my 1978 sabbatical in Germany attending a conference with the author of *Religione Ohne Kirche* – religion without the church – a stinging rebuke to the liberal churches in Nazi Germany, including our fellow religionists there, who did not speak up. German philosopher Karl Jaspers even advised young Germans to join the most traditional churches because the liberal church was cowardly. The leaders of the Confessing Church – Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller - did. I've seen the house when Bonhoeffer spent his last night before execution, and I spent a morning with Niemöller on a 1978 Sabbatical. I will not forget these men – we must not forget them.

As Unitarian Universalists we must re-examine our capacity for empathy. Whether it was empathy or just plain political expediency, Donald Trump understood the hurt that was abroad in the land. In our case, we have begun to understand the pain in people of color and rightly have moved to combat racial and ethnic oppression. What we have not done so well is to identify with white people who have also been oppressed.

You may have read about the declining longevity of Caucasians – especially white men with high school educations. One study concludes that the reason goes deeper than "diseases of despair" - drugs, drinking and homicide. "White Americans may be suffering from lack of hope.... then the problem will be much harder to solve.... Politicians can pass laws to keep opioids out of people's hands or require insurers to cover mental health costs, but they can't turn back the clock to 1955."⁷

We have explored the white privilege many of us enjoy, without understanding that many whites – now cast off by a technocratic society - do not feel so privileged. Their jobs are gone and they are left without hope. In their despair they often look down upon – and blame - people of color, including refugees and immigrants.

We have too often neglected class oppression – the same "rigged" economic system with its built-in inequality oppresses black and brown, and also white. In our "culture of contentment" we have failed to understand how broad is the impact of economic injustice. We might well ask: "If you think the system is working, ask someone who isn't."

I come from lower middle-class roots, but have really distanced myself from this worldview. We, who have been called the technicians and bureaucrats of the establishment, need to address ourselves to all who are oppressed.

Conservatives tout a just society in which each person is free to take care of him or herself. They affirm a “just world fallacy,” in which people get just what they deserve. Social inequality is not only inevitable, it is fair and legitimate – the myth of meritocracy. The “prosperity gospel” of the Christian Right is the prime example. Charity from individuals and perhaps congregations can meet human needs; government is not responsible. Conservative empathy tends to be individual – friends and family, not government..⁸ Individualism dwarfs all other values.

Liberals, on the other hand, tend to understand the just society in terms of solidarity, where we bear a certain responsibility for all – “the interdependent web.” Our empathy often goes to those in the wider community whom we do not know, at times neglecting those close to us. The classic example of that contrast is the hypothetical situation in which while conservatives were comforting Jesus as he died on the cross, the liberals were out looking for a stay of execution from the government.

Liberals tend to turn to the government as a mechanism for justice. For us government is not a business. Business is based on what capitalism calls “creative destruction,” in which it is survival of the fittest. Government operates in the public interest, the common good, not for the benefit of the managers or the stockholders, but for the stakeholders – the people.

For example, one reason Obamacare is in trouble is that the young, healthy people don’t sign up. Part of the reason is practical - limited income - but part of it is moral. Many, whom I call the Young Invincibles, are relatively healthy and feel they don’t need health insurance. They ask “Why should I support a health-challenged Old Geezer?” One reason is human solidarity, but another is more rational: someday the healthy Young Invincibles will become the unhealthy Old Geezers, and who will help take care of them then? I pay taxes for public schools my children do not need. Why? Because I am a citizen in a community; because I believe in solidarity – mutual responsibility. And why should I put environmental justice above corporate profit? Because the long-term well-being of future generations is more important than short-term economic growth. Our ethic requires a long horizon.

This argument took my mind to the late L. Harold DeWolfe’s book *Crime and Justice in America: A Paradox of Conscience*. He postulates two Americas: One is America A, which “is generous, community-minded, benevolent and humane.” In contrast there is America B: “tightfisted, individualistic, self-righteous, materialistic, aggressive, impatient, vindictive, and prone to violence.” While I am skeptical of the bifurcation of Americans into two such neatly defined camps, I find his diagnosis helpful. However, I am also reminded of the words of the Russian poet Yevtushenko that the line between good and evil is drawn not between nations or groups, but right through the heart of every one of us. We must be humble. We need to do some education, not only of ourselves, but in the public square. And so another of our roles as a progressive religious community is to raise the hard questions of political and economic democracy. We need to create a community of moral discourse. How much do we deserve? How much is enough? What is the purpose of a community – to make money or to create justice? To adjust to increasing greed and inequality or to challenge them? To be apologists for a status quo that benefits us, or to be, in Martin Luther King’s words, “creatively maladjusted”?

We must do some theological work, learning to “talk the walk” as well as “walk the talk.” Why is it we do this work of repairing a broken world? What do we want to change in the world and how do we want to be changed in the process? Our theology has been called theologically miles wide and inches deep.⁹ We must learn to talk the walk as well as to walk the talk.

I look to my Universalist heritage: Universalism will not let us down, will not let us go, will not let us off. Unitarian Universalism is a religious liberalism – it is a generosity of spirit. We may not be able to “prove” our faith, but we can “demonstrate” it.

My personal mission statement is to grow the soul, to love and to be loved and to help repair the world. It is that mission that I bring to the task. Happily there are spiritual sources available to me – to us - that enable us to keep political work in perspective.

November 9, 2016, I took my accustomed walk. Miraculously, the sun was in its accustomed place throwing shadows over the sidewalk. Lo and behold, the crescent moon rose as usual, bright in the cold night sky as if it had taken no note of what earthlings did that fateful Tuesday in November. My church still stood firm on its foundations and I was still welcomed there with love.

I knew there is no cause for panic. Cause for work, yes, for panic, no. Politicians come and go - parties win and lose - but life abides - in birth, suffering, joy and death. The ultimate human issues persist even as public issues swirl about our heads. Politics, while vitally important, is not all of reality. Not all human problems are solved by politics, and the church grapples not only with proximate political issues, but with the ultimate issues of existence. Comforted by this perspective, I turn myself to the “hum drum work of democracy.”

Mr. Trump has done one thing very well. He has awakened from their slumber many whose love of democracy was more rhetorical than real. Demonstrations are omnipresent; I cannot keep up. Contribution requests are frequent; I cannot afford them all. There has been a resurgence in the activist community though it is yet to be determined if the religious left will join the party.

E. B. White wrote that “Democracy is the score at the beginning of the ninth.”

The game is not over – it was not over November 9, 2016. The people always bat last. And “democracy is not a spectator sport.” Though the clock is running, I’m still dribbling toward the basket, not yet ready for a desperate three-pointer from center court; I may be in the two-minute drill of my life, but I’m still not ready to throw that Hail Mary pass.. I’m not yet ready for the showers, knowing that the game will go on even when I have retired my number.

During a stint of phone banking during the 2016 election I picked up a sticker with a picture of Susan B. Anthony with the words, “I voted today because of her.” I had hoped to give it to my granddaughter as a token to mark the election of the first woman president. A not-so-funny thing happened on the way to that dream. Democracy is messy – a work in progress.

And so, In the words of the old Russian proverb we need to “Pray to God, but row for the shore.” Be spiritually prepared to be ethically and politically engaged.

Where will I be? Where will you be? Praying for strength, rowing for the shore with our crew, all the time singing our “broken Hallelujahs” across the waves to all who will listen as we row toward the Beloved Community. Hallelujah!!!!

¹ December 18, 2008.

² *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, p 369.

³ Alternet 1/9/17.

⁴ *Washington Post*, March 24, 2017.

⁵ (UU World, July/August 2003, p. 7)

⁶ Elizabeth Warren.

⁷ Jeff Guo. *Washington Post*. March 24, 2017.

⁸ “Why Are Republicans So Relentlessly Cruel to the Poor?” Chauncey DeVega *Salon* 3/23/17.

⁹ See COA Engaging Our Theological Diversity

Notes: Trump is a clear and present danger.

Wrecking ball of chaos