

Beyond the Partisan Divide

A Play:

The Unheard Voices of Unitarian Universalist Conservatives

Introduction

by Reverend Anya Sammler-Michael

A Litany of Restoration

by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley

If, recognizing the interdependence of all life, we strive to build community, the strength we gather will be our salvation. If you are black and I am white,

It will not matter.

If you are female and I am male,

It will not matter.

If you are older and I am younger,

It will not matter.

If you are progressive and I am conservative,

It will not matter.

If you are straight and I am gay,

It will not matter.

If you are Christian and I am Jewish,

It will not matter.

If we join spirits as brothers and sisters, the pain of our aloneness will be lessened, and that does matter.

In this spirit, we build community and move toward restoration.

Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley's prized litany, Reading 576 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, calls Unitarian Universalists to restore the human family. In its fourth verse Wheatley probes: "If you are progressive and I am conservative - It will not matter." Sadly it does matter. Indeed, in the worship materials made available after the tragedy of September 11th on the Unitarian Universalist Association website, Reading 576 is reprinted but with an obvious omission of the fourth verse. While we are winning big successes bridging the divide between humanist and theist, the human family breaks at the border of political ideology. Unitarian Universalists too often sacrifice the opportunity to go deeper and investigate understanding as well as collaboration with their UU brothers and sisters with different political perspectives. This play is one attempt to heal what has been broken and what must be restored if we are indeed going to become a religion for our time.

Reproductions of this play are encouraged. Consider involving your minister and worship leaders in a conversation about sharing this as part of a worship service. Its running time is approximately 18 minutes. Please give credit to the play's compiler, Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael, as well as the individuals responsible for the content, as all of the content was collected through interviews. You

will find their names adjacent to their character's name on the following page. Please also credit the Reverend Amanda Aikman, who inspired this play with her "Unheard Voices of Unitarian Universalists" series of plays and productions.

If you present this play, consider hosting a follow-up discussion. Be prepared to entertain questions, doubts, concerns, and strong feelings. Beginning the discussion with a covenanting process is a good idea.

Before hosting this play give consideration to individuals in your congregation who affiliate as politically conservative. To the best of your ability, engage them in conversation and invite them to share their opinions about the subject matter and their comfort with the potential presentation. Keep in mind that they will feel the brunt of any negative responses and might appreciate knowing that they are respected and loved. Also keep in mind that conservatives in your congregation are not the only ones with something to gain by any positive responses. We all gain when we begin to live into Bowens-Wheatley's call to restore the human family.

With Respect and Gratitude,
Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael
UU Congregation of Sterling, VA

NOTE: This play was originally presented in the context of workshops at the Joseph Priestly District Annual Assembly 2012, and the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association 2012. Co-leaders of those workshops were Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd, Bull Run UU Church, Rev. Scott Sammler-Michael, Accotink UU Church, and Paul Roche, UU Congregation of Sterling, VA.

The Unheard Voices of Unitarian Universalist Conservatives

Characters

Aaron – 60-year-old male
Pat – 41-year-old female
Randy – 57-year-old male
Sam – 71-year-old male
Rick 00 52-year-old-male
Addie – 56-year-old female

Individuals Responsible for Character's content

Charlie Grymes, Bull Run UU, Manassas, VA
Anonymous
Bill Baar, UU Society of Geneva, IL
Richard Elliot, Accotink UU Church, Burke, VA
Martin Wilsey, Bull Run U, Manassas, VA
Susan Brown, Accotink UU Church, Burke, VA

Scene: *Three actors on stage, in the personas of Aaron, Pat and Randy. Each in turn, before speaking, stands and approaches a (or the) microphone. Once they are standing they are engaging with one another—listening and reacting.*

Aaron - Hello, my name's Aaron. I'm a Unitarian Universalist. I'm retired now but used to work as a Federal bureaucrat.

Pat - I'm the 41-year-old mom, of two small children. My name's Pat. I contract for a large IT defense company, but I don't usually say that straight out in my congregation... for fear I will be judged on my current employment.

Randy - I'm Randy. At 57 I work as a program analyst for the US Department of Veterans Affairs. But where you work only tells you so much about a person. Ask us what moves us and how we give back.

I think globalization is driving all sorts of social justice issues from war, to immigration, to income disparities. I like to ask - what is the United States' responsibility to the people of Syria or Libya? And, do we violate these nations' sovereignty when we take steps to protect their populations? How about immigration ... do we suspend our own borders and sovereignty when we choose not to use the word "illegal".

What have I done? Not enough, I'm sure. I participated in the UU groups working on creating peace. This was not easy work, but it was transformative. Some of my comments sparked a whole sermon from our minister.

Pat - My concerns begin with racism and xenophobia. Racial discrimination is alive and well. It impacts everything from the birth certificate of a president to immigration policy and war. Then there's environmental racism and opportunistic individualism and conceit a la Ayn Rand: the nearly cult-like idea that everyone has the capacity to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. In my twenties I was very active in Amnesty International; now as a mother of two small girls I walk the walk by teaching my children.

Aaron - I grew up in the middle of the century in central Virginia, when the Golden Rule was taught in the school and church but ignored in real life. I was not a participant in the Civil Rights movement, being young and sheltered, but it transformed my world. Now I find it easy to tell co-workers "That joke is not appropriate."

Pat - Society's ills are deep but the Unitarian Universalist church I attend helps me and my children heal our world. I'm a former 12-Stepper so I'm really into God. I like my God (whatever he/she/it may be) in my faith. ...and I was pretty happy in the United Church of Christ until I choked when faced with reciting the Nicene creed!

Aaron - I can understand that. When I was seeking a congregation, I looked through the Yellow Pages, discarding every faith until I got to the end of the alphabet. What I came to respect was that that the UUs incorporate multiple religious perspectives but focus on common uniting principles.

Randy - ... for me it's the independence, self-reliance and contrariness, held in balance by our covenant. When I make a commitment to a UU congregation, it isn't because of a profound moment of conversion. I make a commitment to a religious home that allows me to be true to myself while taking seriously, a covenant.

Pat - The sense of covenant is essential. There have been times when I've felt the covenant tested, when I've wondered if others really did recognize my inherent worth and dignity. I'm a Democrat with libertarian leanings. Once I had the audacity to point out that the quality of life experienced by many American urban poor is far better than the poverty experienced by many other peoples in the world. I think it's important to be real. Talking points are for politicians.

Randy - On a couple of occasions when I've gotten into debates on political issues at church I've had members come up to me afterwards and thank me for expressing my opinions with the follow-up that they were open to hearing diverse opinions... It struck me as condescension. Unintended, but never the less.

I'm a Tea Party Republican.

Aaron - I've heard many members make references to the Republican Party as if everyone in the room was a Democrat and shared a common opinion. Sadly I once watched a member get up and leave the service when an announcement presumed solidarity around a single political issue. I'm an independent.

As an independent I believe Unitarian Universalism is a faith for our time. We live in a world of great change and increasing polarity. We need a religious space where we can have the hard conversations, where we can identify shared priorities to implement social change and heal some of the world's brokenness. (*Sit.*)

Randy - We will be a force of healing, when we cease demonizing. We can't dismiss those who disagree as intellectual inferiors.

Rev Augustus Conant founded my Church in 1843 and served as its first minister until his abolitionist stance drove a stake between he and the congregation. Soon after he left, he died. Even though he and the church had split, his funeral was held at the congregation. And ... it was held at the same time as his infant son's dedication. You can just imagine the emotional impact. The Church made a commitment then to never let politics keep them from honoring their covenant.

My experience with the Chicago Tea Party shows me a number of people in a fiscal conservative but social liberal frame of mind. Some of them could find homes in UU Churches. They are much like the rest of us... square pegs that don't quite fit in the usual round holes... and they are in search of a community. *(Sit.)*

Pat - If we can't be the religion for the square pegs, who will? Right now, in this broken world, some Baptist leaders are considering Universalism and some Catholic priests at Catholic universities are publicly acknowledging homosexuality as natural. The time is ripe for a reduction of dogma and an openness to meeting at the margins.

...People can want clean air and water and be pro-business. People can be for equal rights and fiscal conservatism.

The enemy, if there is one, is the belief that if you vote one way than you accept the platform of everyone who speaks for that particular political party. *(Sit.)*

(All three actors sit and pause for 10 seconds as they prepare to re-enter as their second personas: Sam, Rick, and Addie. Each actor will add or remove an article of clothing (e.g. hat, scarf, jacket) to give evidence of the character switch. Each in turn, stands at a (or the) microphone. Once they are standing they are engaging with one another—listening and reacting.)

Sam - *(Stand.)* I'm 71 and retired. Call me Sam.

Rick - *(Stand.)* I go by Rick and I'm 52. I'm a Digital Forensic Research Scientist.

Addie - *(Stand.)* I'm recently retired from being a magazine editor for a defense agency. Before that I served for 20 years in the Air Force. Now I volunteer as a literacy coach, teaching a class in English for 9 immigrants. I am 56. My name's Addie.

Sam - We are all Unitarian Universalists. I've always believed in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Addie - I guess I've always been a UU, even when I was raised Catholic. I never accepted being TOLD how things were.

Rick - And I knew I was a UU when my own search for meaning was encouraged.

Sam - One way to search is through justice work. Our congregation is housing a rotating homeless shelter and I'll work there. I'm also engaged with the topic of same gender marriage and I am listening... and rethinking my stance on income inequality.

Addie - My social justice focus is broad, but if I preached a sermon next month it would be "How Compromise Has Saved the World."

Sam - And I'd like to sermonize on how we are the religion for our time! America's culture is changing. Inter-marriage and globalization will bring us face to face with diversity and unity. We need UU values.

Rick - We need UU values ... when they are working in and through us ...

Addie - In a time where there is so much intolerance and so much pain inflicted in the name of some radical religious views, a religion which offers sanctuary to the weary and oppressed is sorely needed. If we become a team builder for humanity we will rock the world...

(Pause) ...We could rock the world. (Pause)

I try not to identify my political affiliation in the congregation because of the negative ramifications. I'm independent and moderate leaning toward conservative. Even though I'm fairly liberal on most social issues, I get a lot of icy stares during discussions on immigration, healthcare and abortion.

Rick - It's a shame, because we don't change the world by choosing a side. When it comes to politics, I am a purely "issue by issue" guy, but I affiliate as a conservative. In my congregation I am actually known as the Conservative UU!

Sam - I identify as Republican but I am more moderate than conservative - socially liberal on many issues - conservative when it comes to the role of government and national defense. In my congregation, I feel at home. Our minister is not partisan from the pulpit... but there are other congregations where I feel unwelcome.

Rick - I feel at home in my congregation... because I have made it my home. I am not easily offended by the bigotry I have endured... a bigot is "a person who is obstinately or intolerantly devoted to his or her own opinions and prejudices; especially one who regards the members of a group with hatred or intolerance." Yes. That describes what I sometimes endure in my congregation pretty well.

Addie - I almost cry when I hear others describe our congregation as the one place where they can freely express their views. UUs are about as accepting of conservatives as they are of Catholics.

I have been told by members that it's impossible to be conservative and a UU. What better way to imply that I don't belong there?

When the Social Justice Committee sponsored an opportunity for candidates from both major parties to speak, I got an unusual call. The committee wondered if I'd come in to place the Republican literature on the table because no one on the committee wanted to touch it...
(Pause.)

And a few years ago, our minister stood in the pulpit and said she was considering moving to Canada to escape the untenable situation of Conservatives in the federal government - let me make this clear: my minister said she was considering leaving the country because of people like me!

Rick - *(Pause.)* Our foundation is the respect of every individual. We need to make an effort to welcome people across the political spectrum. Otherwise it's pure political bigotry. *(Turn chair and sit.)*

Sam - And honestly you can't tell a person's views about social issues by a party label - in many cases there is a range of points of view, especially with regard to immigration. *(Turn chair and sit.)*

Addie - We are either a welcoming congregation or we are not. We are either tolerant and accepting or we are not.

Those with whom we have disagreements present to us an opportunity to broaden understanding and build consensus ... that necessary work could start right in our congregations. Our world needs us, now more than ever... and honestly I need my congregation. *(Turn chair and sit.)*