

PATRIOTISM AND SOCIAL CONSCIENCE– Richard J. Grzywinski, Lay Speaker

June 28, 2009

Those words of Abraham Lincoln (from #586, SLT, “The Idea of Democracy”):

“Let us dare to do our duty as we understand it.”

What is our duty? How well do we understand it? Is doing our duty as American citizens in conflict with our commitment to Unitarian Universalist Principles when the actions, or inactions, of our government clearly and gravely conflict with them? Are symbolic acts of patriotism such as exhibiting the flag, holiday celebrations, and remembrances, or other overt acts of devotion to our country, and its ideals, somehow contrary to our principles? Do they separate us or bring us together? Do they belong in our Sunday services?

I hope at least to give you some ideas to think about.

Let’s first look at what patriotism is – I doubt that we all have the same perspective.

George William Curtis was a member of, and frequent speaker at, the Unitarian Church on Staten Island in the 19th century. He joined the “transcendental movement” and he, along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian Minister, and others, are believed to be chiefly responsible for the conversion of Unitarianism from a liberal Protestant sect to the open liberal pluralistic denomination it became prior to joining with the Universalists in 1961. He defined patriotism this way:

“A man's country is not a certain area of land, of mountains, rivers, and woods, but it is a principle and patriotism is loyalty to that principle”.

Loyalty to that principle.

More recently, two great Americans were asked to define patriotism in their own terms, Barack Obama and John McCain. The following are excerpts from their response:

First, Barack Obama:

“...that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

For me, it is the love and defense of these ideals that constitutes the true meaning of patriotism. They are ideals that do not belong to any particular party or group of people but call each of us to service and sacrifice for the sake of our common good."

The love and defense of ideals

Next, John McCain:

"Patriotism ... should motivate the conduct of public officials, but it also thrives in the communal spaces where government is absent, anywhere Americans come together to govern their lives and their communities — in families, churches, synagogues, museums, symphonies,, the Salvation Army or the VFW. They are the habits and institutions that preserve democracy. Patriotism is countless acts of love, kindness and courage that have no witness or heraldry and are especially commendable because they are unrecorded."

Love, kindness and courage

Patriotism needs to be held distinct from nationalism. I think of nationalism as patriotism with an inflated ego. And George Jean Nathan , the early 20th century drama critic, once noted,

"Patriotism is often an arbitrary veneration of real estate above principles."

Patriotism has been held hostage for too long by militarism, by self-serving politicians seeking an easy path to the ingratiation of the voters, by people who seek simplistic answers to complicated questions about our national identity, and by those who believe that what we are is what we make ourselves appear to be. They might substitute lapel pins attempting to disguise what lies underneath that pin, in themselves. It's time for us to rescue patriotism from their grasp. I believe that is an appropriate mission for us, as a religious group, because it is a means to ensure social justice, as I hope to explain further.

Note the words of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

"There is, I fear, too great a tendency to give to patriotism merely an interest in making our country unconquerable in war, a feeling that our chief aim is to see that our army and our navy are sufficient for our protection. That is but a part of our patriotic duty. Our country is in a sense continually at war against the ramparts of liberty, equality and justice on which our Republic is founded. Surging constantly are the evil forces of greed, of materialism, of selfishness, headed by those who cynically deny that there is any

prosperity that cannot be expressed in dollars and cents, or happiness except in bank balances."

And lastly, Thomas Jefferson – our 3rd President:

"Patriotism is not a short frenzied burst of emotion, but the long and steady dedication of a lifetime"

From the above (Lincoln, Curtis, Obama, McCain, Roosevelt, Jefferson) we might come up with a composite definition, as follows:

Patriotism is the love of, and dedication to, the ideals and principles of this nation and is manifest through loyalty to those ideals and principles; and acts of love, kindness, courage, generosity, and selflessness.

That sounds like a pretty good doctrine to me, and one that we can all live with. But do we know and understand those ideals and principles to which we should be so dedicated?

Let me continue on with a brief personal story:

When I was a young boy, starting at about age 9, I had a job working for my father as a newspaper boy in Philadelphia, in the subway, outside of the Strawbridge & Clothier “budget store” entrance. To get to my newspaper stand each day in time to intercept the workers and shoppers on their way home at rush hour, I would drop off my schoolbooks at home and walk the 13 city blocks to 8th & Chestnut Street, pick up my bundle of newspapers, then down into the subway corridors to sell below ground at 8th & Market. I did this five days a week, and on Saturdays starting at noon.

I learned all of the shortcuts that would get me there in time to meet the newspaper trucks. One of those shortcuts would take me diagonally across Independence Hall Park in Philadelphia, entering at 5th and Walnut and exiting at 6th & Chestnut.

I recall, especially on Saturday mornings when I had a little more time, walking through the center of Independence Hall and stopping by to see this curiosity called the “Liberty Bell.” I remember putting my finger into the crack of the Liberty Bell, when the park ranger had his back turned, under that strange bolt that went right through the crack seeming to hold nothing together, and knowing that I alone knew “the truth”. That truth that I had uncovered was that, contrary to the theme song of the Davy Crocket TV show, Davy Crocket had not “patched up the crack in the Liberty Bell.”

In later years, after High School prevented me from continuing my newspaper job, my father sold the business (that I think was nothing more than squatters' rights to that particular location). I continued to visit Independence Hall Park taking my younger sisters and their friends for trips to feed the squirrels and birds in the park, picking up a ten-cent bag of crushed corn from the local grocer along the way. Now, a half-century later, my sisters still remind me of how much they enjoyed those trips to the park.

Then, in college, at what was at that time the Drexel Institute of Technology, a few friends and I were in a car driving down Market Street when one of our group shouted excitedly "Wait! Stop!". We pulled over to the side and, as he rolled down the car window and gazed into the distance, he shouted, "Oh, Wow! Independence Hall!"

What had been so ordinary, familiar and commonplace to me was, to an outsider, something so much more. Though I had learned as much as any other school child about the Declaration of Independence, the Founding Fathers, and the Constitutional Conventions, Independence Hall for me was just a place on my way to a job, an old broken bell, blistered paint and old bricks, and a place to feed the squirrels. I could not attach any significance to the place or, for that matter, allow it to become a symbol for my respect.

So let's consider the heritage of freedom that those early occupiers of Independence Hall gave to us. Are we really aware of its significance and importance? Do we know their ideals, their principles? Is this country just a place on the way to our job, old broken promises, blistered expectations and old worn-out hopes, and a place to feed our discontent? Instead of focusing on our principles as expounded by our founders, are we stuck in the present – the immediacy of several wars, violations of civil rights, militarism, might makes right, domestic spying, torture, inadequate or non-existent health care, dysfunctional social relief programs for the poor, a gradually widening of the gap between rich and poor, and other shortcomings, in particular those that characterized what many of us euphemistically refer to as "the last eight years."

With 2,000 Katrina homeless people still living in mobile homes and unable to return to their communities, where, then, can patriotism live? Are we still able to give the USA our fullest respect?

It is so easy to be blinded by the present, isn't it?. But we need to remind ourselves of the legacy of our founders. We need to construct a vision to the future to which, as Jefferson said, we could dedicate our lifetimes. We need to continue to work on our more-perfect union.

I chose the topic of patriotism partially because of what I observed during my few years as a member of this congregation. I noted that rarely, perhaps never, has there been a mention in our services of the various national days of remembrance – the 4th of July, Flag Day, Memorial Day, Veterans Day, etc.. I recall only Harold Clark rising during “joys and concerns” one year and asking us to remember the sacrifices of our veterans. So when we rail against war in such absolutist and righteous terms, myself very much included here, do we insult those who gave “the last full measure” regardless of their understanding of the futility of war. They “did their duty” as they understood it. They deserve our respect and remembrance.

I can also recall an event that occurred during our participation in the Galloway Township 4th of July parade a few years ago when we marched in the “Peace is Patriotic” contingent. I offered one of our members a small flag to carry but it was refused with a look of disdain. The person whispered something like “I don’t do that.”

And only a few weeks ago, one of our good friends donated an American flag to this congregation noting that one was conspicuously absent from our building. I agreed. I sat that flag up in the front of the Sanctuary and there it was for the Peter Mayer concert - and by Sunday morning, it was stashed, by persons unknown, to the rear of the storage closet. One of the senior members of the congregation took me aside and cautioned me that the presence of the flag would, to say the least, not be viewed positively. It was the topic of past controversies, I was told. Some members viewed it as a symbol of separation from others, and contrary to the concept of the unity of all mankind.

That American flag, though abused and misused by many, is above all a symbol of our principles and history. Isn’t our UU chalice the same? How about a peace symbol? To those who might argue that our UU principles hold us to a higher purpose, and therefore the chalice is acceptable as a rallying symbol whereas the flag is not, I would heartily disagree. The flag, the chalice, the peace symbol each represent a common purpose around which groups may rally, and each is worthy of our respect.

Are we Unitarian Universalists just too cool to be openly or unabashedly patriotic? Maybe a little too self-righteous? Maybe a little angry?

I thought it worthwhile to take another look back at our American heritage instead of relying on the fantasies and childish stories fed to me during my early life. I wanted to take a fresh look at who we are. So I chose a book entitled “The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution.” The author, Bernard Bailyn, presents his findings of the review of over 400 pamphlets written in the 25 years or so leading up to the year 1776 by American political thinkers and theorists, politicians, ministers, and an assortment of persons with access to printers. Typically, the

pamphlets ran 10 to 50 pages, or 5,000 to 25,000 words. Some even larger. The book earned Bailyn a Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize. I was not disappointed!

Those pamphleteers remind me so much of today's successful bloggers in that these pamphlets were not just idle opinions, or short bursts of sarcasm or outrage, but more likely they were logical and reasonable presentations of arguments, subject to wide public scrutiny and debate, and very often building upon previous pamphlets - in agreement or in rebuttal. They were often based upon an acute knowledge of Greek and Roman classics, and Enlightenment Era writings. They are an accurate record of the predominate thoughts of the era.

We tend to think of the founding fathers as having solely economic motives for demanding independence from England. ("Boston tea party" "No taxation without representation" etc.,) But Bailyn's book clearly reveals the highly-principled thoughts of these amazing figures. Their motives were so much greater and so much more nobler. They were in fact more concerned with virtue, high ideals and principles, and, overwhelmingly, individual freedom - the cause of liberty in its highest and truest aspirations. Our revolution was not a macroeconomic event, but a virtuous one:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity..."

Written another way through some gentle editorial massaging, these might very well be a partial restatement of our own Unitarian Universalist Principles.

We are the inheritors of great wealth. Wealth of principle. Wealth of spirit. And were it not for the courage of these visionaries, our own UU faith may never have experienced its metamorphosis. It is the liberty that these founders afforded us that allowed the free exchange of ideas, the religious liberty, the fertile ground upon which to grow our faith. And it did just that.

The Reverend Gary Kowalski is the senior minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington, Vermont. In his book entitled "Reclaiming the Spirit of the Founders", he says:

"We are the beneficiaries of their foresight and generosity. To the extent citizens of the United States now enjoy the blessings of freedom and a measure of civility among those

of divergent faiths, we can thank the revolutionary spirits who set the country on its present courseso that religion could attain its present vigor and variety.Taking that spiritual legacy for granted would be both ungracious and dangerous."

So now let me get back to Unitarian Universalism.

(By the way, I read somewhere that Universalists believed that God was too good to damn them for eternity. Unitarians believed that they are too good to be damned.)

Unitarianism and Universalism would be transformed by the evolving American culture of freedom of religion and of expression, and today would be unrecognizable by John Murray or Joseph Priestley, except, perhaps, for a few surviving hymns. It certainly would not be in the place it is today, 1,000 congregations strong. Unitarianism may still have been debating the divinity (or partial divinity) of Jesus and whether or not he was capable of working miracles. Universalism may have gotten to the point where, perhaps, hell was not a fiery place of torment, but maybe just a little uncomfortable. They may still have been debating devils, or, perhaps, postulating the temperature of the eternal flames.

In the post-colonial environment, absent the intolerance of the entrenched European religious establishment, and because of the prejudices against the Church of England for their complicity in the abuses leading up to the revolution, religious debate in early America went into high gear, and the liberalization of Unitarianism and Universalism went into overdrive.

The rest is history, as they say.

{ THE FOLLOWING PARAGRAPHS WILL BE INCLUDED IF TIME PERMITS }

Two events between then and today are worth recalling describing.

The first World's Parliament of Religions met in Chicago in 1893. This landmark event included many Universalist and Unitarian speakers which then led within a short period, to the American Congress of Liberal Religious Societies which included six Universalist and three Unitarian Churches.

Another significant event in the US was the development of humanist philosophies in the 1920's and 30's culminating in the signing of the first "Humanist Manifesto" in 1933. Of the 34 distinguished signers of that document, 13 were Unitarian ministers and one was a Universalist minister. Two were both. The manifesto generally stated, among many other things, that the universe was self-existing and not created, that the dualism of mind and body must be rejected, (that is, there is no such thing as a soul), that the distinction between the secular and the

sacred can no longer be maintained, that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values.}

So let me summarize:

1. The principles, ideals and underlying philosophies upon which the American Revolution was sparked and upon which this country was ultimately founded are wholly consistent with our current UU principles.
2. Our country's actions have not always been in line with these principles and ideals, but we have continued to make slow consistent progress towards forming that "more perfect union." Unitarian and Universalism have similarly struggled and witnessed their own imperfections during their formative years.
3. Unitarian Universalism developed and matured in parallel with American democracy, at the same time, on the same soil, and, very often, with the same thinkers. More than any other denomination, Unitarian Universalism is truly the "American religion."
4. We can be simultaneously patriotic and supportive of our UU principles by running for public office, voting conscientiously, supporting candidates who ascribe to our values, writing letters to the editor, petitioning, engaging in public debate, demonstrating against injustice or against illegal or unjust wars, serving in charitable or public service organizations, and by personally serving as models of good citizenship while active members of this congregation.
5. And to answer the key question: Are patriotism and social conscience in conflict? I believe I have an answer for you to consider. They are not in conflict because they are the same. True patriotism is social conscience taking action!

Let's not be shy about our brand of patriotism. And let's help finish the task that our founders stated. I believe that we have that obligation both as Unitarian Universalists and as citizens of these United States.