

THE TROUBLE WITH LIBERALS

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OPENING WORDS

"I cannot promise to obey a law I do not respect.
-Margaret Sanger, to the judge who was about to sentence her

You good people must know by now that every sermon I preach is preached first and foremost to myself. I preach according to my passion, and my passion for any given subject is generated by the struggle within me—the struggle to answer the questions of my own heart, to reconcile my own conflicts. And so it is with this subject today. I've been asking myself for some time now, where is liberalism failing me? Or, where am I failing myself?

This question has come chiefly because of my role as parish minister in this large urban church. The city demands that I notice. I see runaway kids with various shades of hair, I see skinheads in boots and chains, I see people with matted hair who lie down to sleep on concrete, I see those who are mentally ill on the streets, sometimes talking to themselves, sometimes shouting obscenities. I cannot hide from these images, though I often wish I could. The question that I'm asking myself is, "How far am I willing to go to change things?" Am I too comfortable, with my middle-class values, to go after real change? Maybe the system serves me pretty well, so I'm satisfied with just tweaking it a little.

A donation to the Food Bank, a stint at a soup kitchen, the occasional handout on the street. Not that all these acts of kindness are unimportant, for people have immediate and pressing needs. But when do we ask the question, "Why do so many people have immediate and pressing needs?" And further, ask, "Are the fundamental problems, the underlying structures of oppression being addressed?" I give money to the Food Bank, and the next year, even more families come for food at the Food Bank. What's wrong with this picture?

I've begun to ask myself, "How can we move to more radical change, how can we go to the root of the problem?" That, in fact, is what "radical" means: it means going to the root, to the basics. It means fundamental change, especially in social and economic spheres. Those who work for such change may be considered extreme—may be labeled as troublemakers, or unstable, or dangerous. For example, in the 19th century the early abolitionists were vilified in the larger society, whose economic well-being rested in the labor of slaves. This was true in the North as well as in the South. Our most prominent minister, William Ellery Channing lost his pulpit in Boston for preaching really a rather mild anti-slavery sermon. Freeing slaves, seeing Blacks as human beings and not property, was a radical position, just a little over a hundred years ago. We have people living today whose parents were slaves.

So what is the difference in radical, then, and liberal? Well, let's go back to the slavery question. What would a good liberal say, back in the 1800's? What would a good liberal church say? I can tell you what many of them said. Even our own churches, though we don't like to talk much about that. They said slaves should be treated well, of course. Slaves should have enough food. And time to rest from their labor. Reforms are needed, they might have said. But as for freeing the slaves, well, that wouldn't be possible. How could the slaves care for themselves without masters? Maybe someday, we will get to the point that we can free our slaves—yes, that would be ideal—but we're not there yet. With liberals, the system basically stays the same, but is improved upon.

Garrison Keillor has a funny piece on the contemporary liberal. It goes like this:

"Tomorrow morning you go to work at Amalgamated Potato and find an envelope on your desk with the CEO's name in the upper-left corner, and you sit down and draw a deep breath. After 22 years working your way up through the Skin Division, you are about to become road kill, one more confused raccoon smeared across the corporate highway. .

"But you open the envelope, and it isn't your final notice. It is a memo announcing that Amalgamated Potato is about to transform itself through Total Quality Organization, a team-oriented leadership process in which power flows holistically, and you will spend three days next week at a seminar being empowered.

"So you report to the seminar center, . . . and you sit in a circle of potato employees with loose-leaf notebooks on their laps, [notebooks entitled] Tools for Transformation, and you listen to a young facilitator named Tern explain how TQO works. "Our business isn't potatoes; it's helping people live and work to their full potential," she says. "This is a team process; management does not make decisions"; management empowers the team-leadership process.

"Oh, you think. I see. The words holistic, leadership, process, quality and commitment pop up everywhere.. . This might be a good time to quit your job and head for Alaska and open a fishing camp, you think.

"You blame liberals for this at first.. something about the term facilitator makes you think of liberals and their schoolmarm view of the world ("No running, please, no pushing, no bad talk) [a view] that leads them to eliminate sharp edges and outlaw flirtation between strangers and rearrange the playing field so that the sidelines are the goals. Liberals are in charge of the schools and they rewrite the tests to keep the scores from dropping. Liberals run the churches, and nobody talks about sin lest it tend to make folks feel marginalized. But TQO isn't the work of liberals. Liberalism is dead, so dead that Democrats have all become moderate Republicans. . . . TQO is the heavy hand of Big Business.

"You've got to make a swift, smart decision whether to be a team player at Amalgamated, work a longer week, donate your life, accept that the company has switched your health plan over to an HMO that requires 30-day advance notice [for] emergency care, or should you fly to Anchorage and get work guiding hunters across the trackless wild.

"A dense fog has descended on Amalganiated Potato, and it will not lift soon. You need this like you need a porcelain hairnet. Go west, young man. Go North. Don't give your life to them. Get out of town."

Garrison Keillor's words are a good starting point for talking about liberalism. To be sure, there is a lot of good implied by the word "liberal": the word implies freedom, generosity, tolerance, broadmindedness, democracy. And because of all these qualities, I have felt comfortable calling myself a liberal. And yet his little essay begins to suggest the problems with liberals. The guy who works for Amalgamated Potato knows what the company is about-knows that he or anyone else can be laid off at a moment's notice, knows that the new democracy of management is a lie, knows that he holds no real power. But he keeps his thoughts to himself. Maybe he tells his wife or his best friend. But he is really pretty passive. He has ideals, he dreams about going to Alaska, but he dismisses those dreams as unrealistic. You get the strong feeling that he is caught in a trap and he is not going to take any drastic action to escape. So he'll sigh and make a few jokes, and that's it. He's not going to head for Alaska.

He jokes about liberals in this little piece, saying that they have a "schoolmarm view of the world ('No running, please, no pushing, no bad talk'). He's talking about middle-class values here. No matter what is happening, we should be polite. We should avoid being upset, and if we are, we should never show it. We should not talk loudly or use vulgar language. We should certainly never push, or be aggressive. We "eliminate sharp edges," as he says.

He further says that liberals "outlaw flirtation between strangers." An interesting phrase. It's about sex, but not just about sex. Again, it's about conforming to middle-class values, this staying within the cultural code, no matter what one's instincts might be. Who are the strangers he speaks of? Well, those who are not like us. He says that liberals "rearrange the playing field so that the sidelines are the goals"-that is, we try to make it easy for everybody to win~ We rearrange the

playing field. But we never refuse to play the game.

And then he adds a comment on liberal religion~that's us, folks~and as you know Garrison Keillor regularly makes light of Unitarian Universalists. He says that "nobody talks about sin lest it tend to make folks feel marginalized." He's right about most Unitarian Universalist churches and also about most mainline Christian churches. We are desperately clinging to a kind of 19th century social Darwinism in which everything is evolving onward and upward, and no one will be bad any more when everyone has warm milk and cookies. This belief is held sacrosanct to many, in spite of overwhelming evidence of the existence of evil. In spite of the recent brutal killings of Blacks and gays, in spite of ethnic cleansing, in spite of yet another school shooting, in which 12 youth, a teacher, and the two shooters lie dead.

Could it be that the tolerance that we so value has gone awry here? These two boys in Littleton, Colorado, who did these killings showed ample evidence through their behavior and language that they had the potential to do harm. They had pulled a gun on a classmate once before. They had been arrested on another occasion. They even made a video showing themselves shooting and bombing. How much of this was tolerated as "youthful indiscretion"? I don't know.

I asked my son, who taught high school for the last two years, what he thought about school shootings. "Why do they happen?" I asked him. He said, "*You* know, Mom, parents don't know their children very well. They don't know where they are and what they're doing. They all think their children are little angels~they just don't know."

I think we live in an age when many adults are afraid to parent, afraid to lead. Unsure of their own values, they allow their children to drift socially and morally. We need to communicate with our young people about what we believe to be good and true. We need to know their whereabouts. We need to say no' when they are out of line, and we need to enforce that "no." As Unitarian Universalists, we pride ourselves on our tolerance, on the fact that we give our children a lot of freedom, that we allow them to make their own choices. But how much freedom is too much? How much responsibility can they really handle? Children, including teenagers, feel insecure when parents don't set limits.

I think Garrison Keillor's article challenges us in a playful way about our undue optimism, our naive belief that everything's going really pretty well~we just need to patch a little here, patch a little there. Let's look at liberalism still mote closely. How does it play itself out politically?

Charity is the number one way the liberal has of helping the disadvantaged. This approach leaves the power structures intact and maintains the status quo. It is not empowering to the needy~in fact, it is just the opposite, for it puts them in a place of greater dependence.

The liberal wants reform, but goes after it chiefly through the vote, through the law, even though much of the law is designed by the powerful to protect the interests of the powerful. And until our campaign finance system is changed, our politicians are beholden to the monied interests that support their election.

The liberal wants order, wants harmony, does not want to cause a fuss, and so will let things slide in favor of keeping the peace. In a similar way, the liberal is too often willing to let injustices be maintained, if they personally are not affected. Liberals tend to think that everyone is really more or less like they are, under the skin~or for heaven's sake, these others could be, if they just had a little more opportunity. Because liberals are rewarded by the present structure, they assume that others are, too. Liberals who are well educated, and that includes most of us~prefer to read and study and talk about issues rather than actually taking action. Liberals tend to be issue-oriented, focusing on one area, such as racial justice or peace or the environment. They are passionate about their issue and can't see why others are not, too. But they often don't recognize the larger system of economic oppression which is the container for all the various issues. In concentrating on the effect upon the victim instead of addressing the system, they say to themselves, yes, something is being done. Some good is better than no good, they say.

I remember when I was a young woman teaching in New Orleans and attending a Presbyterian church, a very

wealthy church, on St. Charles Avenue. I was there when H. Rap Brown came down the aisle and interrupted the service to demand reparations for Blacks. I was there on another Sunday when the associate minister made a plea for the men to bring their old shoes to church so they could be taken to the prisoners in Parish Prison, some of whom apparently had no shoes. Now Parish Prison was known as perhaps the worst prison in the U.S.-we all knew that. After the service I went down to speak to the minister. I said, "This is a powerful church, full of influential people. Why don't we try to change the prison?" And he simply said, "All I know is that some prisoners need some shoes." This has all too often been the position of churches in this country: help the needy, but don't touch the politics that keeps them needy.

Our economic system welcomes liberalism, because liberalism takes the edge off the pain, so the system can remain in place. For example, we think of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the great advocate for the poor, and yet there was enough political unrest, enough labor unrest in his day, that some historians have pointed out that what he really did was to make the world safe for capitalism. He took the edge off the pain.

In short, the liberal too much of the time sees what *is*, as inevitable and doesn't really question hidden assumptions, doesn't really see the larger structures of oppression. I remember when it first hit me that the economic structures in this country could be different. It was when I was studying social work, and we had a visiting professor from Brandeis, a man named David Gil. I don't remember the rest of his speech, but he said something I have never forgotten. He said, "We have made decisions about who owns the resources of our country, and we can make different decisions." We can? This was the first time that had occurred to me. I was so impressed that I later flew up Brandeis to see if I could study with him. He said, yes, if I wanted to, but the administration was trying to get rid of him-he was too radical for them, he said. Fortunately, he had tenure. I decided not to go into that political hotbed, but I began to wonder what "too radical" meant.

Changing at the root. Systemic change. The radical is willing to speak up publicly, even if what he says is unpopular. Is willing to offend people, to be called names, to protest the status quo, to engage in civil disobedience. It is Gandhi encouraging his people to make salt from the sea, which was against British law. It is Margaret Sanger who, after witnessing her mother's slow death, worn out after 18 pregnancies and 11 live births, began teaching poor women about contraception, something doctors already provided for the rich. She went to jail eight times, defying church and state. It was Rosa Parks refusing to give her seat on the bus to a white man. It is Martin Luther King, Jr., and his followers who broke the law by sitting at lunch counters in the South. It is Unitarian Universalist minister Nick Cardell who, at the age of 72, recently spent 6 months in prison, along with others, for simply crossing a line in a peaceful protest against the School of the Americas, a U.S. Army school in Fort Benning, Georgia, that has trained assassins and counter-insurgents to fight in Central and South America.

As much as I abhor violence of any kind, I had to listen to Paulo Friere, the famous educator and liberator of the poor in South America, when he came to speak in Berkeley. He said, "When the oppressed fight back, we say how violent they are-but the real violence is being done daily by the oppressor.

When we think about it, it is often the radical leaders who have been the ones to make the real change-and then the liberals take credit for it and integrate it into the system, in a responsible" manner.

I must tell you that our Unitarian heritage is one of radical reform-in fact, we were birthed out of what is called the Radical Reformation, or the People's Reformation in the 16th century. Our ancestors in the faith wanted to create a new kind of church, a free church where individual conscience could prevail. According to historian Alicia Forsey,' Unitarian leaders were significantly influenced by the Anabaptists, most of whom were pacifists, shared in the community of goods, practiced believer's baptism, allowed women to preach, and demanded separation of church and state. They were relentlessly persecuted, and 30,000 were killed in Friesa alone.

Michael Servetus, martyr to our faith, introduced the concept of Antitrinitarianism into Italy, says Forsey, and thereby started the radical reform movement. He was burned in effigy by the Catholics and burned in the flesh by Calvin, his dissident book strapped to his thigh. Francis David, the leader of the Unitarians in Transylvania, concluded that Jesus

should not be worshipped. In fact, he concluded that doing so was blasphemy. He was charged with "innovation" and thrown in prison, where he died. Radical reformer Anneken Jans was arrested in Rotterdam for singing a hymn with her traveling companion. She was executed by drowning, but before her death, she wrote her son Isaiah a letter, which read as follows: "Therefore, my child, do not regard the great number, nor walk in their ways. Remove thy foot far from their paths, for they go to hell, as sheep unto death. . But when you hear of a poor, simple, cast-off flock which is despised and rejected by the world, join them; for where you hear of the cross, there is Christ. "2 These are our forebears. We have a free faith because they died for it.

So the questions I bring to you today, are the questions I'm asking myself right now. And, dear friends, I will never ask you questions I am not willing to ask myself. Am I willing to identify with, to be in solidarity with, the cast-off flock, the despised and the rejected? Am I willing to court the displeasure of people in high places? How much of myself am I willing to put on the line-how much of my money? What about my reputation? What would I be willing to go to jail for? What would I be willing to die for?

These are not easy questions, are they? But these are the questions that will tell us the state of our true character. These are the questions that will tell us how much truth we are willing to hear. These are the questions by which we can count our courage, measure our faith.

So be it. Amen.

PRAYER

Beloved, we are thankful this day for those who have not followed the easy path, those who have put themselves in the way of danger that we might be free. We ask for the courage to be uncomfortable-to question our assumptions, to stand with the dispossessed, to speak the truth to power. We ask not for freedom from fear, but for freedom to move beyond our fear. So be it. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Go now and be strong of heart, resolute of purpose. Go in love and peace.

¹Material on the Radical Reformation was taken from an unpublished paper by Dr. Alicia Forsey, Dean of Students at Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, CA.

² Alicia Forsey, in an unpublished paper, quoting from George Hunston Williams' *The Radical Reformation*, p.586.