



James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Polarity: the Engine of Life

Sermon by the Rev. Darrel L. Richey

October 19, 2008

Well, it's almost that time....

Thank GOD -- it's almost over!

The Election cycle....or election cyclone...

I'm amazed this year at the intense level of polarity within our culture.

And as I illustrated with our children, I think that polarity is the energy that drives life.

But there's a different side to that story.

I do think that polarity is a necessary part of life, but like almost everything, there are good aspects to it and others that aren't so good. Life is driven by opposites. You think of anything that moves or exists for that matter, I can show you how polarity is necessary for existence. Atoms themselves are combinations of what we call "positives" and "negatives" (terms I don't like because they are loaded with judgments -- positive being good and negative being bad). I think the reality is that both are neutral. How these forces are acted on can be good or bad, but the energies themselves are outside of morality or any ethical framework.

For example, we drive our cars basically by energies that both make the car go, and make the car stop. Who can say that the engine is "good" and the brakes are "bad"? It's the balance of the two, and how they are acted upon that make good drivers or bad drivers. The responsibility lies within the choices and actions of individuals. Today however, almost all of us participate in various degrees of demonizing polar ideas themselves as good or bad, and then relegate those who embrace such ideas as somehow guilty of "original sin" or sin by association.

There are good democrats and good republicans, as well as bad ones. And each of us, as individuals driven by survival instinct, is responsible for acting out self interest. Most of the time that drive serves us well. But just like polarity is needed in a car, polarity is required in our personal lives. When we are passionate about particular issues it's often best to realize that passion as a focus can be a good thing, but passion combined with the exclusion of other ideas is almost always destructive.

As we enter into the height of political fervor in our two-party system, I hope that we can see beyond our key issues and consider that just like the world's religions, differing political view points can have nuggets of wisdom that we can learn from. I don't have to be a Buddhist to appreciate and learn from Buddhist teachings and techniques. And I don't have to convert to Judaism to consider the meaning behind Jewish high holy days and to explore how I might engage them authentically for myself.

When I was a young teen, learning in school about the two-party system, I decided that I was a republican. I was taught that democrats believed in a strong central government which was necessary to ensure equal opportunities for everyone, and that government was the collective voice and power of the people: Republicans believed in a weaker central government, almost like a necessary evil, and that though it was the collective voice of the people, it's primary function was empowering communities and individuals to make decisions for themselves.

Today, I'm not fond of either party, and am angry at the compulsion in our society to side with one or the other. Today, if you ask young people whether they're gay or straight, many of them will answer that they are "person specific." Wouldn't it be great if we could be that way when it comes to our politicians? But the reality is that every candidate who gets elected, to some extent, has to become a tool of the political machine that backs them.

Worse still, is that it seems like the real power behind the political machinery is completely out of touch with the everyday citizenry they claim to represent. The U. S. claims to be a democratic republic, but I think today I would describe it as an oligarchy (which according to Wikipedia is a form of government which rests with a small elite group based on royalty, wealth, family, military powers or occult spiritual hegemony). The vast majority, if not all, the major political offices are held by women and men of relative, if not great, wealth. Political power often runs in families, like the Kennedys, the Bushes, etc. Our political system is intrinsically linked with the military and enmeshed with religious and spiritual ideas. All this occurs with a certain amount of consent or at least complicity from the subordinates (or the "common citizenry").

Just like polarity needs balance in order function for the benefit, our political system needs balance. The polarity within our political system is like a malfunctioning car. It's hard to get anywhere when the brakes and engine are constantly fighting each other, just like it's hard to get anything done when our two parties are in constant discord. Worse still, the intense polarity is distracting us, distracting the "common citizenry" from the oversight that is our ultimate responsibility. The clash of ideologies and cultural wars has allowed great abuses by those in power. Both sides of the divide have gotten lost in the family feud while robbers run off with the chickens and the cattle!

This is not anything new. It has occurred within both parties throughout history. It wasn't that long ago that democrats were the party of racial segregation. The extreme racism within the party at one time split the democratic party. In the late 1840's the democratic party ushered in reformers that began to adopt anti-segregation policies. Hubert Humphrey, then the Mayor of Minneapolis, gave a speech during the 1948 Democratic National Convention urging for an anti-segregationist plank. Five delegates walked out. President Truman endorsed a civil rights plank and the dissenters, led by Strom Thurmond, then governor of South Carolina, organized a separate party, the States Rights Democratic Party. The group became known as the "Dixie-crats."

The main power brokers of the Dixie-crats would eventually migrate over to the republican party, which weaved their ideology into the party. But the memory of the past abuses of the Democratic party is still engrained within many Black families and communities. Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy" helped galvanize the party in the 1972 elections.

I want to tell you a story....

There once was a president of the U.S. who rose to power by tapping into ideological ideas of a minority of Americans. He believed that the ends justified the means in obtaining and maintaining power. He and others in power began to infringe on rights that many of us had assumed were sacred. The executive branch under him began opening private mail and wire tapping private conversations of average citizens. There were massive abuses of power by U.S. intelligence agencies. There was a war overseas in which private U.S. companies were benefiting greatly while concern over the war grew for most Americans. The President supported the war and established a policy: rather than training foreign troops, the policy favored replacing them with American troops. Our troops were not welcomed. Our position within the world community was in question.

This president relied on the counsel of men like Donald Rumsfeld. He surrounded himself within an isolated bubble of unquestionable support. Any dissenters were investigated with ferocity, and nay-sayers were accused of being un-American, communists, etc.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it. Well President Nixon's actions are similar to what's happening today. It took the "smoking gun" of the White House Tapes before anything could be done to stop him. But....he was not a demon. He did a lot of good things for the country. His expertise in diplomacy is widely acknowledged. After his resignation, he was followed by Gerald Ford, since Spiro Agnew, (the Vice President) was brought up on charges with a felony conviction. Gerald Ford lost his own election primarily due to being associated with Nixon, especially since he pardoned him shortly after taking the office of presidency, even though the pardon was orchestrated as part of a deal for Nixon's resignation.

"Power Corrupts: Absolute Power corrupts absolutely." This arose as a quotation by John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, first Baron Acton (1834–1902). This historian and moralist, who was otherwise known simply as Lord Acton, expressed this opinion in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887: The actual quote was "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."

I don't think that those in power are necessarily bad. I do think that they have to make very difficult decisions that I would never want to have to make. They are immersed in the "entrails" of our society. And entrails are never pretty nor do they smell good. But the entrails are a necessary part of life. It's no wonder why ancient mystics believed that fortunes could be told by reading the entrails of sacrificial animals.

It's easy to blame the current administration for the economic woes of today. I think the reality is that the current administration played a role in it but that leaders of both parties made decisions for several years which set into motion events that have culminated in today's problems.

I would like to share words from an article written in 1987 by Douglas Hibbs, Jr. (published in *The American Political Economy*: Harvard University Press). Hibbs points out that according to some political scientists, "unemployment rate has no impact on electoral outcomes, while fluctuations in real income do." This tells me that it takes personal self interest to motivate people to take action.

In 2003, Antal E. Fekete, Professor Emeritus, Memorial University of Newfoundland wrote this in an open letter Congressman Ron Paul:

“Stop Greenspan From Plunging America into a Depression”

“I have been a student of monetary science for almost fifty years and I am greatly disturbed by the explosive and malignant growth of bond speculation which I attribute directly to the inept monetary policy of the Federal Reserve.”

He goes on to write:

“Contrary to conventional wisdom, a falling interest rate structure is no boon to the economy. A low and stable interest rate structure is. All thoughtful economists would agree that lower prices with stable interest rates (as obtained under the gold standard) are no threat. On the contrary: they are a welcome fruit of increased efficiency. It is the combination of falling interest rates and falling prices that is deadly: if prolonged, they could lead to Depression.”

And closer to today, here is a statement from the online source “fund advice.com” in response to an online question “Would a Democrat in the White House be good for investors?”

Paul Merriman, answered this way in August 2008:

“I thought it would be interesting to see what history teaches us about markets when republicans and democrats control the presidency. According to a study by Ned Davis Research covering 1901 through the first half of 2008, the U.S. stock market’s real return after inflation during republican presidencies was not radically different than under democratic ones. The nominal returns under democratic presidents were 7.2% -v- 3.6% under republican presidents. But inflation was about twice as high under democratic presidents and the end result was a real return of 2.5% under democrats and 1.69 under republicans.”

Polarity is good when it is not an absolute. And when division becomes the only focus, it’s easy for someone or some group to take advantage. I long for the time when differing views can contribute to the richness of humanity. But this takes courage and clarity to see beyond the smoke and mirrors of orchestrated polarity. As Unitarian Universalists, we are called upon by the principles we espouse to consider wisdom from a variety of sources, especially those that differ from our own perceptions. And first and foremost we are called to see and to embrace the inherent worth and dignity of every person. These same principles caution us to avoid demonizing individuals or groups of individuals for any reason.

Our common humanity unites us. We have far more in common than our differences.

I pray for, I want to work for balance within the polar ideas of society. Polar opposites when used in balance drive the very stuff of life. I choose to be a force that urges, that lives out that balance, inviting others to join me.

May it be so this season.....