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Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Religiously Liberal, Otherwise Conservative: Is It Possible?

a service presented by Blaine Davies and Rev. Elizabeth Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Religiously Liberal, Otherwise Conservative: Is It Possible?

Good morning. I'm Blaine Davies and along with my wife Patrice I officially joined the Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship a couple of years ago. We joined after several years of attending services and participating in BUUF events. For me, there were several things that convinced me I wanted to be part of the Fellowship.

First, I wanted to expose our children to a broad range of religious views and to stimulate their thinking about morality. Since I consider myself an agnostic I wanted to participate with them without having to be hypocritical or dishonest about my beliefs.

Second, while I do consider myself an agnostic I am constantly enthralled by the wonder of it all. Furthermore, as I get older I find myself gravitating to the view that there is indeed a higher being but that for whatever reason he and/or she has not chosen to be very specific in sharing the details of either their existence or expectations. I am not particularly optimistic I will ever figure it all out. However, I am enjoying the attempt and I am appreciative of our covenant that states that we "promote and affirm each person's lifelong pursuit of spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic fulfillment."

Finally, I believe in tolerance and a respect for diversity. There is, in my opinion, entirely too much conflict on both a personal and international level because we as people and/or nations are entirely too intolerant of our differences. I do believe that diversity is our strength. Again, I am appreciative of our Covenant that states we "promote and affirm the sharing of our common Unitarian Universalist values and diverse religious heritages with our children in an atmosphere embracing the vision and wonder of their spiritual journeys." Furthermore, I agree with our declaration that our mission is to "provide an open forum for the exploration of diverse ideas."

With all due respect for the great job Elizabeth and our service coordinators do in putting together interesting services and sermons I often find myself during services reading to myself the BUUF Covenant. It is almost as though I have this compelling need to constantly reaffirm I still agree with it. Having read it again in preparing for this sermon I am happy to report that indeed I do.

There are many things I appreciate about our covenant, our mission and our beliefs. However, of the three reasons I shared as to why I joined BUUF it is the third point, the respect for diversity that I want to discuss today. In doing so I want to make it clear that I am not here to make a statement nor an accusation. I merely would like to explore a question that has troubled me for some time. It is simply this. Are political conservatives and/or conservative viewpoints welcome at the

Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship? Does our respect for diversity extend to our differences in political as well as religious views? I pose this question because after several years of attending Sunday services I have observed that except for congregational commentary at the conclusion of our services I rarely hear a conservative viewpoint.

Personally, I do not consider myself a conservative. Nor do I consider myself a Democrat or a Republican. However, I do hold conservative views on a number of subjects and I occasionally vote for Republican candidates. In fact, there are many aspects of both the Democratic and Republican parties with which I strongly disagree.

In our hymnal there is a responsive reading by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley entitled "A Litany of Restoration". It states "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. I do have many conservative beliefs and I am asking, does it matter?"

I would like to take a moment to briefly share my views on a variety of political topics and while I may be wrong and in some cases misinformed at least for the present they are my opinions.

I believe in capital punishment. Its implementation should be reserved for the most heinous crimes and the rights of the accused must be zealously safeguarded. Nevertheless, I do believe there are criminal acts that deserve this ultimate punishment.

I am generally pro-business. I think there is entirely too much cynicism regarding the conduct of American corporations who I believe with a few notable exceptions are genuinely interested in meeting the needs of their customers in a responsible fashion. I have worked at Hewlett-Packard for 18 years and am still impressed with our commitment to building quality products that meet real customer needs. Furthermore, I

believe we take our responsibility to both our employees and our community very seriously. HP's recent site wide campaign promoting respect for diversity regardless of race, sex, religious beliefs or sexual orientation is but one of many examples.

I am actively involved with the Concord Coalition. It is a bipartisan organization committed to balancing the federal budget and ultimately reducing the size of the federal debt. As a nation, I believe we spend entirely too much money on entitlement programs that have exceeded what we can afford by giving away money to people who neither deserve nor need it.

I believe many environmental efforts have gone too far. While I respect our Covenant's commitment to "promote efforts to bring human existence into greater harmony with our environment" I do not agree with many environmental programs. When I see timber rot in burnt forests because of environmental legal roadblocks preventing the harvesting of that timber I find myself in strong disagreement with the environmental organizations responsible.

I own stock in Idaho Power and I am not yet convinced that breaching the dams on the Snake River as a way to restore salmon is a good idea. Hydroelectric power is clean and it is cheap and if we destroy it we will end up with more expense and pollution making up the difference with alternative sources of power generation.

While I am ambivalent about right to work legislation per se I do believe that no one should be compelled to join a union as a condition of employment.

I think union demands are often excessive and self-defeating. I believe unions too often strap their companies with a non-competitive cost structure. The result is a reduction or elimination of profits that ironically often lead to a loss of jobs and wages.

In general, I am in favor of welfare reform. I think that people capable

of working should work provided they are giving an opportunity to train and that realistic day care options for their children are available.

I think Phil Batt has been a pretty good governor. I am not a pacifist and I favored the invasion of Iraq in the Gulf War. I agree with the peaceful resolution of conflicts whenever possible. However, as we learned in World War II appeasement can sometimes lead to the very conflict we are trying to avoid.

I do not want to wish to silence the expression of liberal political opinions. In fact, I have appreciated the opportunity to listen to opinions that while different from mine have stimulated my thinking on a number of important subjects. I'm merely asking if the voicing of a conservative viewpoint is equally welcome. I also want to make it clear that I have never personally felt unwelcome here though I have wondered whether it would make a difference if I broadly expressed my conservative views.

Frankly, I have a lot of liberal views too. However, I've focused on my conservative opinions in order to make a point. Are you comfortable embracing someone with my views as a valued and welcome member of this congregation?

Diversity: a Religious Issue

Blaine dropped in to my office one morning last spring, to bring up and chat about the issue with which we wrestle this morning. I believe that he is not alone in feeling a subtle-but strong-unspoken assumption among many of us that we all agree upon certain things, including but not limited to political matters. The adult daughter of one of our members has expressed to her dad that she does not feel she would be entirely welcome here, because she is not a "North End liberal." (She is progressively inclined, but, for instance, belongs to the Concord Coalition.) A member who is changing to friend status, inquired, "Where's the diversity?" He is more interested in sports and working with his hands and, yes, even watching TV, than he is in reading

books; he holds some of the more "conservative" views outlined by Blaine; he has not felt genuinely welcomed for himself.

Diversity is at heart a religious issue. If there is anything that could be called genuinely foundational to the Unitarian Universalist faith, it is our commitment to honoring diversity.

Humanists among us cherish each human individual, regarding the vast array of differing talents as vital to expressing humanity's high potential, to creating a moral, just and loving world. Theists among us affirm that we are all equal in the sight of God, regardless of how different we are from one another. The most cherished Unitarian Universalist principle-the one you know, if you know no others-is "respect for the worth and dignity of each person." We also affirm the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, clearly implying that we are equals on the journey, as long as worth and dignity are respected.

But I share Blaine's concern. I share his suspicion that we do not, in fact, have truly open minds about certain kinds of diversity, particularly regarding positions more conservative than those held by the majority of us.

A conversation I had with a colleague at last June's General Assembly gave me some insight, brought me face to face with this issue. Imagine yourself in my situation. This particular colleague serves a smallish New England church (100 or so members), with an endowment of a million and a half dollars. I said, "Who on earth administers it?" He laughed and said, "That's a good job for your Republicans!" What would your reaction have been -you, a UU from the congregation in Boise, Idaho? Mine was to say first, "I don't think we have any Republicans," then, to add, with considerable chagrin, "Or, if we do, they're probably in the closet...."

It is true, of course, that the majority of us in this congregation are probably Democrats. But there is nothing in our religious principles

that excludes those of a more "conservative" political bent, if they are not espousing discriminatory views or claiming Truth For All People. We will be enriched when we act openly enough that such folks feel comfortable-not defensive!-when expressing their views.

We do not consciously set about to create a "tyranny of the majority"-but we do it. We have no conscious intention of violating our religious principles by excluding others, but we often speak in ways that do just that. It is one thing, in a group of people-say, a church potluck or event where you don't know everyone well-to open a conversation on the abortion issue (for instance) by saying, "I hold a strongly pro-choice position, and am really teed off with the guys in our Legislature." This allows a person who may have a perfectly ethical anti-abortion position to feel they can have a conversation with you. If you have opened the conversation by saying, "I see those chauvinist fools in the Legislature are at it again" (perhaps adding an insulting categorical remark about the religious affiliations of the legislators to boot), a newcomer who disagrees is going to feel very uncomfortable. Who's going to want to speak up if they have just been categorized with fools and practitioners of stupid religions?

I have lately been in a group or two where I would not have wanted to be a newcomer who even sort of supported the Boise Police Department. Back in 1991, I was in plenty of casual UU-affiliated gatherings where newcomers who supported the Gulf War would have had to be fairly pugnacious to have the courage to express their views.

What do you think?

Blaine and I are raising an issue we both have a concern about. I am extremely grateful that he came in that day last spring, for most people just suffer these kinds of concerns in silence. Or leave, muttering, "Where's the diversity?" I was delighted-still am-that he volunteered to do a service with me about it.

And since this is one of these "afflict the comfortable" services-as

opposed to comforting the afflicted-let me add a couple of very important qualifications to our words.

Here at BUUF, we are a personally warm and welcoming congregation, growing more so all the time. We care about and nurture each other better than many church communities do, and we do our best to welcome the stranger in our midst.

In addition, some of us do practice what we preach about diversity. There are those among us who genuinely embrace others in a whole-hearted way, and are very conscious of the effect casual partisan remarks may have upon strangers. Many of the rest of us continue to try, knowing that it is hard to remain consciously respectful of all responsible positions, regardless of how different they are from us. Our unconsciously generalizing and alienating comments usually stem from our strong opinions and from our sense that we are "at home" among "people like us."

So the picture is by no means bleak.

Having said that, we remind you again of the reading Blaine quoted: "If, recognizing the interdependence of all life, we strive to build community, the strength we gather will be our salvation.... If you are progressive and I am conservative, It will not matter." And, again, we pose again the question: Does it matter?

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