

“Decisions, Decisions”

NOVEMBER 6, 2016

As I did last week, this morning I shall be preaching on the national election. I will not be endorsing any candidates. I will try to highlight some of the underlying moral and ethical issues worth trying to recognize and understand.

Harry Frankfurt begins this morning’s First Reading by noting that one of the most salient aspects of contemporary culture is how saturated it is—top to bottom—with b.s. We all know this and we all contribute to it, the philosopher goes on; its ubiquity we take for granted, *as well as* our ability to recognize b.s. and avoid being taken in. Or so we like to think! Frankfurt’s point, essentially, is that we live in a world of phoniness. Perhaps this was always so, but he’s inclined to think it’s getting worse; we’re so bombarded by media nowadays that there’s more of everything—including more b.s. And then there’s modern *advertizing*.

One hundred years ago, advertizing was all about product information. But starting in the 1920s and accelerating dramatically after the Second World War, advertisers have used increasingly sophisticated, half-hidden, and subliminal gimmickry; they’ve become magicians in the marketing of image, personality and lifestyle to stimulate our artificial cravings. Is it any wonder that our people, the America public, are the most addicted people in the world? The truth is, there has never before been a culture anywhere in the world like ours; where, by the time a child is five years old she’s heard hundreds of thousands of mistruths: advertisements inviting her to enjoy some special cereal or toy or game or what have you. Meanwhile, the same techniques that stimulate consumer desire in unsuspecting toddlers can be—and *are being*—used to sell candidates and political hocus-pocus to grown-ups.

The 2010 *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision stunned democracy advocates and trampled a number of campaign finance laws. A slim five-Justice majority of the Supreme Court ruled that corporations—including for-profit corporations—do indeed have a right to spend as much money as they want to elect or defeat candidates in our elections, effectively granting corporations the same First Amendment Free Speech protections granted to real live people.

What we’re seeing and hearing in the current campaign—the vulgarity, the commercialism—is a result of that decision. A dear and longtime member of the congregation came in and talked to me after one of my sermons. She asked: how can I steel myself against the worst of it, and how—is it possible?—to find the detachment and awareness needed to participate in the unfolding political drama *without* loosing faith *or* the hope and attention good citizenship requires? Well, OK dear member—and all of you other members: let me do my best to make the case for just that.

Although I'll be speaking on political issues, I want to make it clear at the outset that I'm not called to the role of political commentator and I do not aspire to be one. Unitarian Universalism is a *faith community*; we're a religion *not* a political front group. And as a Unitarian Universalist minister it *is* my calling to consider aloud the moral and ethical issues at play and underlying our social and political landscape. That's what I will try to do this morning.

Also at the outset: I want to make clear how our UU faith is founded upon (comes out of, organically) not only *Biblical tradition*, but also that of *Classical Greece*; that just as the Hebraic and Jesus traditions have, in a certain mythical sense, taught us *breadth of heart*, the Socratic and Platonic myths have taught depth of mind, *i.e.*, how to think. As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (more or less the originator of Process Theology) allegedly quipped, "2500 years of Western philosophy are but a footnote to Plato." Whether that's true or not, the ideas and ideals contemplated by the philosophers of antiquity clearly animated the minds and imaginations of our country's founders—and can still inspire great and powerful deeds by courageous patriots of today.

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Four years ago, while serving as Interim Minister of the First Unitarian Society of San Francisco, I joined their church choir as part of a cultural exchange to Cuba. One thing that immediately impressed me about that island was that *in Cuba nothing's for sale*. There are no 'for sale' signs around. Cars, apartments, boats: one either barter for these things or forgets it. How different from the United States, where *everything* is for sale! Offer the right combination of carrot and stick and no one, we're told, will ever refuse. As noted earlier, ours is the first culture organized in such a manner: where, thanks to advertizing, the average American kindergartener has been deluged with well over 100,000 hyped-up consumer claims—b.s. by any standard—before he or she has learned to read.

Modern advertizing uses demographic and now "psychographic" research to identify and then target blocs of people as buyers of their products. Lifestyle images are given priority over the presentation of facts. Politicians' imitation of mass marketing strategies has made modern political discourse undistinguishable from advertising. If (as many political conservatives believe) people are motivated solely by economics—by the market place—then it follows that they have no rights except as consumers. But if that is true, sadly, the central principles of democracy are gravely threatened; a threat made greater by the assumption, gained from our advertising-dominated culture, that the same process as that by which advertisers now sell their commodities should guide the selection of political leaders.

And what is that process? Professor Harry Frankfurt labels it *humbug*. Or, more simply, *b.s.* Raphael Demos calls it *sophistry*. In either case, its essence is distraction--distracting the listener from what's really at issue. That's what I want to bring to your attention today: the effort to distract our awareness from what's really going on.

And what *is* really going on? *Externally*: the democratic experiment. Can free people govern themselves and remain free? We've been at it in this country for 240 years and it's still up for grabs. And always imperiled. *Internally* (*i.e.*, within each person's *heart* or *psyche*), what's going on is the drama of self-discovery and fulfillment; what the Transcendentalists called *self-culture*; what the Universalists called *living in the Greater Hope*. Carl Jung called it *individuation*. Martin Luther King, Jr. called it *learning to love*. Plato called it *philosophy*.

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For Plato and his students, philosophy was way more than a head-trip; it was a cleansing of the soul. And a bona fide philosopher, for Plato, was a certain sort of person, recognized not so much for the topics she or he discusses as for the manner in which it's done: personal unaffectedness, leisureliness in argument combined with wholeheartedness and zeal, along with deep respect for her or his opponent's point of view; it's not so much that she thinks about the truth as that she *embodies* it; not so much that she studies universals as that her personal attitude is tinged with universality and untainted by pettiness. Kind of like Socrates. Maybe you've known someone like that. They can change your life. Mitch Albom did and the book Tuesdays With Maury [1997, Penguin Random House, NY] describes the experience. My Ancient Civilization professor, Mr. John Mattingly, was that for me—transformational in every way.

How to cultivate breadth of soul like Mr. Mattingly's? Like Professor Morrie Schwartz? How to grow out of pettiness and into universality? According to Plato, that's what education *should be* all about: drawing out of students their own individually nuanced, as-yet-unrecognized, unfolding inner path. For Plato, the true teacher was kind of a midwife: teaching was never about laying a corpus of data on people, no matter how brilliantly conceived. The best teaching, rather, is always about recognizing and nurturing the *seeds*, planted deep within each student's psyche (or soul), of her or his future growth.

The sophists, meanwhile, came at things entirely differently. They didn't see how the soul had anything to do with it; for them teaching was simply a *commercial* enterprise. They sold their skills as teachers to wealthy Athenians so that their sons might learn music, literature, dance, the natural sciences, (such as ancient biology and chemistry) as well as debate and rhetoric. The sophists argued by the use of reason *and* deception to persuade others to agree with a certain point of view. For the sophists, teaching was kind of a contest and, in essence, a commercial transaction. If they persuaded people more effectively, well that made them better teachers—who deserved more money. Truth? *Truth had nothing to do with it.*

The methods of sophists are still popular today among people who see the democratic experiment as little more than a commercial opportunity and the human soul as but a potential consumer. TV's Bill O'Reilly and radio's Rush Limbaugh are two of the most popular modern-day sophists. Captivating, yes—and persuasive, but at what cost? They tear down their opponents, overwhelm, harangue, bedazzle, and act affronted. More than anything else, they lead their listeners away from critical issues by using market and poll

driven images and buzz words that incite emotion and turn off critical thinking. They're sophists. Maybe that's not such a damnable thing to call a person nowadays. But it should be. And it's true.

What does this mean, practically? Well for one thing it helps explain the months and months of sophistry and b.s. that our nation has been going through: the use of manipulative images, bogus data, and mock indignation in an effort to get people to vote without thinking—or without thinking very deeply.

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There's another way to consider these things. I recently reread Harper Lee's 1961 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. My mother read it to us that same summer and I read it again in high school. This time I listened to it—read by Sissy Spacek—on a long automobile trip. What struck me this reading—or listening—was the author's craft at quickly building and releasing dramatic tension; characters come into conflict / and then it's resolved. Tension / release; tension / release. And the tension, again and again, comes from the myriad pressure points of race and class and outlook and background that are part of any community, every community. It's by virtue of that dynamic tension—*creative tension*—that step-by-step incremental progress is made.

One of the lies of sophists everywhere is that the political landscape would be better if their ideology—*whatever* it is, left or right—won out, and people espousing other points of view somehow just disappeared. Our Unitarian Universalist faith has never believed in such a thing. We don't want to eliminate those with whom we disagree; we want to live in community with them. Keep in mind: *the values of democracy are reason, compromise, and conciliation*. Finding consensus and cutting a deal. Working things out between all the contending parties. This is the *opposite* of sophistry.

Earlier I mentioned Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead interpreted Einstein philosophically. And out of that work grew Process Theology, which like Feminist Theology and Covenantal theology is basically about *relationship*. About finding ways to live and be in healthy relationship, *right relationship*. Where there's a place for hierarchy and individuality, but a place *balanced* by feelings, and by political structures, that promote collective solidarity.

Such a view sees our country's progress and health as coming *not* from the TRIUMPH of any one group over another or of one particular ideology over another, but considers all progress, all advances in the democratic experiment to come from the CREATIVE TENSION between contending groups.

It's the tension that generates the creative juice: the TENSION between Alexander Hamilton's proto-Republican/capitalist ideology & Thomas Jefferson's Democratic/collectivist tradition; The TENSION between individuality and living in covenant; the TENSION between Liberty and Equality. I remember when the award winning movie *Forrest Gump* came out, Alabama Senator Richard Shelby waltzed poetic

about how Forrest [Tom Hanks] represented the kind of person that made America great—in contrast to his lifelong love interest, Jenny [Robin Wright]. But Senator Shelby, to my UU mind, missed the whole point: that what made (and still makes) America great is creative tension generated by the love between the down-to-earth Forrest-types and the New Age, mercurial Jenny-types.

There are sophists on both sides of the political spectrum who would take no hostages—ignore them. There are sophists who would hold anyone hostage who dares to think critically. In her novel, Harper Lee equates such behavior with the heartless and senseless killing of a mockingbird.

All this applies internally in our own lives and externally in *all* the communities we live in—in our families and in our congregational community here, as well in our country. Positive energy comes from turning conflict into creative contrast—and then crafting something cool and new and liberating out of the creative tension driving it all. Let that be our goal here: to turn our struggles into creative ones, built on mutual care and respect. And let us hope and pray and *endeavor* to make the same true for the United States. So may it be. Amen. Namaste. Shalom.

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