

“After the Election: A UU Point of View for the Future”

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Like everyone else in this room, I'm sure, I was shocked and appalled by our presidential election. Like so many others, I expected progressives to win the presidency and the senate, and instead we lost them both. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, but lost the electoral college. My understanding is that the electoral college system gives extra weight to the conservative regions of America; it is a relic of our slaveholding days, originally designed to protect white, Southern interests against the more populated North. So for a liberal candidate to win our presidency, an *extra*-large liberal voter turnout is required. That didn't happen this time.

Analysts are trying to figure out why that extra-large liberal voter turnout didn't happen. Why didn't more millennials, Blacks, Hispanics and women turn out to vote Democratic? Maybe misogyny? Maybe future shock from the rapid liberalization of social mores, what with gay marriages and transgender rights and legalized marijuana? Maybe “white fright” because of the “browning” of America and the relative loss of “white status” especially among the least educated and least well-to-do whites? Maybe a sense that globalization has broken down self-protective walls around American jobs? Maybe Hillary Clinton isn't progressive enough for millennials to support enthusiastically? Maybe progressives are too out of touch with the worldview of half the voters in America, unable to speak to them in a language they understand; unable to offer them reassurance that our current and future society has an important and respectful place for them? Maybe we progressives discounted Trump voters “self-centered” fears and concerns too much? For the next few months we'll all be reading about the many reasons

that Hillary lost. We need to follow that discussion carefully. We need to understand what happened.

In the past ten days, from some liberals, progressives, I've heard a sense of defeat and hopelessness. What hope *is* there if a presidential candidate espousing greed, racism, sexism, hatred and narcissism can win the presidency in our country after 240 years of a constitution espousing "liberty and justice for all," and after 80 years of Roosevelt's progressive New Deal social programs and after 50 years of Johnson's progressive Great Society? Even with our economy doing so much better, and unemployment way down, and with Obama at such a high approval rating, progressives still lost the presidency and the senate—so what hope is there for the future? Well, here are four of my personal foundations for hope:

First, losing a battle does not mean we lost the war. For thousands of years, and especially for the past couple of hundred years, the world has been becoming a safer, healthier, better educated, and more compassionate place. This is documented in the *2015 United Nations Human Development Report*, and thousands of years of human progress has been meticulously documented by Harvard professor Steven Pinker in his book, *The Better Angles of our Nature*. Worldwide, there has been a centuries-long decline in the risk of dying by homicide, including in wars and by acts of terrorism (contrary to the impression given to us by the 24/7 bad-news channels). Worldwide, there has been a decreasing chance of premature death due to diseases. Worldwide, there has been an increase in literacy and education. Worldwide, there has been an increase in the material standard of living, and a reduction in extreme poverty. Certainly there have been major temporary setbacks in this overall trend of improvement—World War 2, for example. But the key word is *temporary* setbacks. After every setback, civilization has picked

itself up, and moved forward toward more good for more people. There is no reason to believe that this historical progress will suddenly stop now.

Second foundation for hope: There has been a steady increase in progressive social mores and policies on *this* continent for 300 years now. This is well documented in Nobel laureate professor of economics, Robert William Fogel's book *The Fourth Great Awakening*. This book has many helpful insights about the back and forth of social progress, but just to focus on one point, he states that every presidential administration has seen at least *some* degree of liberal progress in civil rights or expanded education, or better working conditions, and so forth. To do a partial check of this, I went to Wikipedia.com to read about the social policies in the administration of George W. Bush. Fogel's book was written just before W. took office; so surely *that* administration would prove Fogel wrong about unbroken liberal progress. After all, W. came into power with a Republican House and Senate; surely *he* was able to roll back the social clock. But it quickly appeared that Fogel is right. Bush was the first Republican to appoint an openly gay man to his administration. He also appointed the first openly gay ambassador; he did not repeal President Clinton's Executive Order banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the federal civilian government. He did not attempt to repeal Don't ask, don't tell in the military, and he said that he had no problem with individual states allowing gay marriage. Bush appointed the first Black person to serve as Secretary of State, and when Colin Powell resigned, Bush appointed the first Black woman to be Secretary of State. Bush appointed the first Hispanic person to serve as United States Attorney General. Bush signed a bill that protects Americans against discrimination based on their genetic information when it comes to health insurance and employment. That issue had been debated for 13 years before becoming law. Bush signed into law legislation to put the National Science Foundation (NSF) on a track to double its

budget over five years and to create new mathematics and science education initiatives at both the pre-college and undergraduate level. Bush signed the Great Lakes Legacy Act authorizing the federal government to begin cleaning up pollution and contaminated sediment in the Great Lakes, as well as the Brownfields Legislation, accelerating the cleanup of abandoned industrial sites. Bush's most regressive initiative, to privatize Social Security, never got off the ground, even with a Republican controlled Congress.

Now, don't get me wrong: I voted against Bush both times, and he did a lot of bad things, as we all know very well. The world would almost certainly be better off had he never been president. But you can see that Professor Fogel is right: the progressive agenda for society was not rolled back even by W; no doubt, progress was slowed, but progress continued. We're all reading that Trump is *already* waffling on his most regressive campaign promises. We have no strong reason to think that the 300-year trend of social progress in the U.S. will suddenly be reversed.

My third foundation for hope: Win-win solutions always beat win-lose solutions in the long run. In other words, inclusive cooperation always outlasts us-vs.-them aggression in the long run. This has been shown to be true in biological evolution, in economics, in international relations and in psychological game theory: in the long run, those who work to *help* everyone succeed more than those who try to *defeat* everyone. Robert Wright's book *Nonzero* documents this well, as does *Why Nations Fail*, by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson. One example: After World War II, the Soviet Union engaged in a win-lose zero-sum conquest of Eastern Europe. After World War II, the United States engaged in the win-win, non-zero-sum Marshall Plan to help Western Europe back to full flourishing, and we did the same in Japan. Today, the USA enjoys the mutual prosperity and freedoms of Europe and Japan; today the Soviet Union doesn't

even exist, and it's offspring, Russia—which has *never* known any form of government except authoritarian domination—struggles in every way.

The historical superiority of win-win solutions to every challenge means that the conservative, ethnocentric agenda of making sure that my tribe is dominant will in the long run continue to fade away to make room for the progressive agenda of helping everyone, worldwide, to flourish. It's a law of nature: Prosocial behaviors eventually displace antisocial behaviors. I don't think that this election changes that.

Fourth foundation for hope: Demographics and globalized communication are on the side of progressives. Extreme conservatism feeds on ignorance. It feeds on the illusions that my way is the only right way, that my people are the best people, that what happens to me and to my tribe is the most important thing in the world—illusions all. Extreme conservatism feeds on viewing all others through the illusions of dogmatic, negative stereotypes: *the Blacks, the Jews, the Muslims, the Hispanics, the poor, the Gays*; all imagined to be opposing tribes out to harm and take from me and mine. Extreme conservatism relies on lack of *real* knowledge about the rest of the world beyond my tribe, and on lack of the personal interactions with actual individuals from other tribes; personal interactions break down stereotypes and *humanize* the other, making it harder to devalue them and to see them only as the enemy of what is right and good. I was a young teen in the racist South, but when LeRoy, a young Black man just a few years older than me, one of my grandfather's farm hands with no formal education, befriended me, taught me to drive a farm truck, and spent hours with me on the farm talking and laughing together, I found it impossible to really believe that he and his family were intrinsically different from me, inferior to me. I quickly came to like, love, and respect LeRoy. I could no longer share my white community's attitudes of intrinsic White superiority, and that friendship with LeRoy influenced

the rest of my life. Nowadays, in our globally connected world, with ever-increasing education and ever-increasing world communication, *ignorance*-based illusions and extreme ethnocentric beliefs based on unrealistic stereotypes about other peoples are becoming harder and harder to sustain in the face of increasing contact with reality. Those tribal us-superior-to-them illusions will fade one college graduation at a time, one intercultural contact at a time, and finally—maybe too frankly—one elderly extreme conservative’s *funeral* at a time. On average, each younger generation is less dogmatically ethnocentric and conservative than its parents’ generation, as we saw with the Millennials’ overwhelming vote for Hillary. In sum, literally the forces of social evolution are on the side of progressives. This election doesn’t change that.

These four facts—the historical trend of liberalization in the Western world, the historical superiority of win-win (nonzero-sum) relations rather than win-lose (zero-sum) relations, America’s 300 year track record of continuous social liberalization, and the liberalizing of each younger generation—are not *guarantees* that social and political progress will continue. But they are *reasonable* bases of hope and optimism for our country’s future.

So, progressives should, of course, pause to console one another, should help each other get through the grieving process, as we mourn our so-recently deceased dream of a quick continuation and strengthening of the progress made over the past eight years. But let’s not let that grief cause us to believe that losing this election means that the very long historical trajectory of Western civilization is taking a 180 degree turn; it’s not. The United States is not going back to the society of 1955, complete with segregated drinking fountains; I don’t think that we’re even going back to 2008. Too many—*most*—Americans just don’t feel and think that way anymore.

So we cannot get stuck in pathological grief and lose hope and the will to try, or just lash out in fury. We must get back into constructive action. Certainly, I owe that much to my Black childhood mentor, Leroy: Because I was a white male, I grew up with every opportunity and support for achievement and social advancement open to me. Oppositely, because he was Black when and where he lived, LeRoy had *no* opportunities for advancement open to him. His only possible future was more of the same: lifelong manual labor on the farm for subsistence wages, and daily reminders of his third-class social status. So, while by the time I was in my early 20s, I was well along to the various successes our society offers its privileged ones, LeRoy, in his early 20s, needlessly caused his own death. For him and the millions of others subjected to structural social repression, we are *not* free to clock-out of the effort to make ourselves into a better nation, no matter how tempting that feels sometimes. The words of Rabbi Tarfon written one thousand nine hundred years ago, speaking to his defeated people, remain true, "It is not your responsibility to *finish* the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either."

So, we must return to the political fray; we must do what any good general or coach does after a loss: we must *learn* from it to better prepare for the future. First we must learn how to rally more of the Bernie-supporting millennials into the liberal *mainstream*; we can't simply dismiss them as pie-in-the-sky idealists—that's how conservatives view *us*. Of course, millennials *did* vote for Hillary by a huge margin. That fact alone gives me hope for future elections.

Second, we must learn how to better understand and how to include in the progressive ranks those frightened and angry Whites who are not so fixedly tribalistic, but who now feel left behind by globalization of jobs and by computerized robotic manufacturing; we cannot simply

disregard them as the evil tribe from our *own* “superior” liberal *ethnocentric* tribal perspective. Many of these frightened, angry Whites have a significant degree of universalistic morality, usually couched in traditional Christian terms of Jesus’ refusal to condemn sinners and his willingness to help strangers. These more universalistic traditional Whites—some of whom voted for Obama—have (temporarily, I hope) regressed down to a more ethnocentric circling of the wagons against what they see are enemies of their well-being: immigrants who compete for low-wage jobs at home, loss of jobs to low-wage countries, a secular, intellectual culture that sees their religion as ignorant superstition, and sees them as uneducated. I’m not sanctioning any part of their us-against-them worldview. But we progressives must help ethnocentric Americans of every color to feel *secure* enough in their own well-being that they can live up to and be proud of their own best ideals: Christian charity, equal opportunity for *all* people, and America’s historical embrace of refugees—“Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Traditional, ethnocentric Americans aren’t going to get to *that* higher moral ground if they feel always under attack.

One of my favorite philosophers is Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher who is still alive, now at 87 years old. Habermas has written brilliantly on many social and philosophical topics, and in all his writings Habermas makes a strong case that the best moral solutions, the solutions that best lead to flourishing for all, and probably the solutions that are most stable over time because they are win-win solutions, those types of solutions are discovered through *discourse reasoning*—what Habermas prefers to call discourse morality, but what is usually called discourse ethics.

For Habermas, *discourse* is a very special kind of communication: individuals coming together in good faith to hear one another, to understand one another’s concerns and aspirations,

to respect that each person has an equal right to flourish in life, and to create and discover together new solutions that best address everyone's concerns and best nurture everyone's aspirations. During the discourse process, everyone is open to learning new facts and new viewpoints from everyone else; so as they learn during the discourse, individuals' concerns and aspirations may change, their notions of what human flourishing includes may change, and may develop into something less ethnocentric, more universalistic, more good for all.

Of course, such discourse is rare, and probably never exists in pure form. But it can be approximated when individuals, especially thought leaders, try their best. Scientific discourse at its best approximates this ideal. And something like this happened in South Africa during the transition out of Apartheid, and as a result, there was no civil war or pogroms. So now we Unitarian Universalist thought leaders must try and retry to engage in discourse ethics with those who defeated us in this presidential election. We must understand their concerns and aspirations, we must help them understand our concerns and aspirations, we must—together with them—discover new solutions that are win-win for everyone.

When Ellen and I moved to Rogers from Houston, Texas, in 1993 I left behind my Houston UU fellowship. Instead, we attended a progressive Methodist Sunday School class in Rogers for a few years, and when that class essentially disbanded I started playing golf on Sunday mornings—my alternative outdoor service, I called it. But after W's shocking reelection in 2004 even with the Iraq debacle, golf suddenly wasn't good enough anymore. Ellen and I *had* to have the support of people who were beyond the ethnocentric stage of development, people who held *universalistic* beliefs and feelings about the general good. We knew where to go for that support: we began driving to Fayetteville to attend the UU fellowship there. We went there to have the support of progressives' during our grief at losing that election; we *kept* going for years to be

with likeminded people and to celebrate and to foster humanity's increasing awakening to universal justice and compassion.

Today, I'm very glad that *this* UU fellowship is here. We can support one another, help one another process this loss and help ourselves avoid despair about the future. We can cling to our reasonable bases for hope for a better future: World history that is progressive; American history that is progressive; the superiority of inclusive win-win solutions; and liberalizing American demographics. We can foster constructive discourse with more conservative Americans. We can celebrate and encourage our ever-increasing awakening to the reality of the interconnected and interdependent brotherhood and sisterhood of *all* people, and here we can strengthen the fellowship of *all* people who aspire to universal justice and compassion.

We UUs, and other progressives, have the privilege and the responsibility of being in the vanguard of the moral progress of civilization; ultimately, that is what Unitarian Universalism is all about. As unfairly burdensome as it feels sometimes, pulling civilization forward is a responsibility that we can never deny; and—even when tired and bruised and sad—we must forever fulfill that responsibility to help create a better world for everyone. With each other's support, we will do just that.

Thank you.