

## How to Survive the Next Thirty Days

An editorial in the *New York Times* a couple of weeks ago talked about some ministers who were planning to endorse a presidential candidate from their pulpits on Sunday morning. The clergy want to challenge the law of our land that forbids tax-exempt religious organizations, such as this fellowship, from supporting political candidates. Their effort, organized by a coalition of Christian lawyers and called Pulpit Freedom Sunday, argues that the tax code restricts the ministers' freedom of speech.

But, as the *Times* editor notes, this is not about freedom of speech. "This is about [wanting to] protect the collection plate while using the power of the pulpit to influence elections. Shepherds are entirely free to tell their flocks whom to vote for. They just cannot expect taxpayers to subsidize turning their churches into campaign offices" (September 27, 2008).

I am not going to stand here today and tell you who to vote for. I believe in preserving and strengthening the separation of church and state; I endorse the Internal Revenue practice of exempting religious organizations from taxes, and I understand the rules. I have clear instructions from the Washington Advocacy Office of the Unitarian Universalist Association about what we can and cannot do in this building and as a religious body with relation to partisan activity in support of political candidates.

Besides, I don't know who you should vote for. Only you know that. So you are not going to hear a direct or veiled instruction this morning about what to do in the voting booth in thirty days. This is not the time or the place for that. I'll say it again: I don't know who you should vote for. Only you know that.

However. I do want to ask a question this morning that stands at the intersection of politics and religion. What's the difference between a maverick and a heretic?

*Maverick* comes from the name of a nineteenth-century Texas lawyer, politician, and land baron, Samuel Augustus Maverick (1803-1870), who was a slave holder and fought in the war for Texas independence from Mexico. He bought up huge tracts of land in Texas, where he kept cattle and, contrary to local custom, refused to brand his calves. He said he didn't want to hurt the poor little doggies. His biographers speculate that Maverick's unconventional practice gave him the opportunity to claim any unbranded cattle who wandered onto his land (Wikipedia).

The word *maverick* was first used in 1867 to mean "an unbranded range animal, especially a motherless calf" and also "an independent individual who does not go along with a group or party" (Webster's Collegiate, 11<sup>th</sup> edition). Rebels, individualists, and others who do not abide by the rules are called mavericks to this day.

*Heretic* is a religious term dating from at least the fourteenth century. It refers to a "dissenter from established religious dogma, especially a baptized member of the Roman Catholic Church who disavows a revealed truth" and then, by extension, to "one who dissents from accepted belief or doctrine, a nonconformist" (Webster's Collegiate, 11<sup>th</sup> edition).

Gotthold Lessing (1729- 1781), the German Enlightenment philosopher who loved freedom and championed tolerance, said, "A heretic is a man who sees with his own eyes."

If you are a Unitarian Universalist, you may or may not be a maverick but you surely are a heretic. Our faith has been identified as heretical since the Council of Nicaea in 325. Most of us have come out of some other religious tradition (if not ourselves, then our fathers or our grandmothers) from which we are now dissenters. For better or for

worse, heresy is woven deep into the fabric of our Unitarian Universalist history and sensibility.

Another way to express the difference between a maverick and a heretic is to say that heresy is always about religion.

All we heretics and mavericks have been living through some scary times. Worldwide financial markets are falling and rising and fluctuating wildly, banks are failing, people in Nashville can't buy gas, people in Mohegan Lake can't borrow money. Congress has enacted emergency legislation, and nobody knows if what they have done is going to calm things down.

Meanwhile, it's thirty days until our national Election Day, and the presidential contest is so close that no one can call it with confidence. The citizens of our great nation are wildly divided on the whole range of issues: the economy, of course, and also health care, education, government reform, the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan. The talk on the TV is inflammatory; on the internet it's incendiary.

I have wished, this past week, that I was a Jew celebrating the High Holy Days. I want to sit down with my family around a holiday table with a lot of good food and talk about these scary times. The Jewish religious tradition is five-thousand years old, and I envy the Jews the perspective that must offer. It's true that Thanksgiving is coming, but we could all use some help today and in the next 30 days, the days after the passage of the economic legislation, the days leading up to the election, as the clamor increases, the voices get louder and nastier and more partisan, the claims get more outrageous, the rhetoric gets more divisive, the playing on the emotions gets more blatant—everything escalates and intensifies.

Three things are especially frightening about our situation today: 1. Seeing how powerless we all are and how clueless our leaders can be, seeing our human limitations in the face of these immense problems: the financial crisis, the political process. The outcome of this presidential election will deeply affect all of our lives, and it takes a lot of faith to

believe that what any of us individually can do will influence that outcome.

Second scary thing: Seeing how interdependent everything is, how what happens in the markets is linked to the availability of credit is linked to the failure of small businesses, how what happens to people in New York state depends on what happens in Ohio and Pennsylvania and Illinois.

The scariest thing of all is seeing how many people in our nation understand the world so differently from the way any one of us understands it. How diverse we are as a people, as a nation. How many people can take seriously candidates and positions that are truly anathema to many others.

You will not be told how to vote here, but the fellowship does offer resources to face these scary times. Our faith provides a framework of ethical principles and values, and this community can be a safe haven where each of us can sort through our ideas and feelings. We must continue to do everything we can to make this fellowship a safe place for all political perspectives, just as we strive to make this a safe place for all religious perspectives.

As a covenanted community of faith, we have promised each other to dwell together in peace and to help one another seek the truth in love. It's not so easy to keep that promise when opinions are so different and feelings run high. But if we can't do it here, then where will we learn?

We can practice deep listening in our Small Group Ministry groups and around the table at bring-in lunch. Come into that landscape that includes everyone and see what you can observe. Listen to hear another perspective, an idea that is different from your own. Bring your curiosity. Leave your judgments at the door.

Survival in these difficult days requires two things: First, you need to keep your self together. Turn inward. The self-examination process of the High Holy Days offers us a powerful model for our own Unitarian

Universalist practice. We can quiet our turmoil and ground ourselves in the bedrock of our faith when we consider our own beliefs and behaviors against the standard of our Seven Principles: Have I responded to every other person as if she had inherent dignity and worth? Does my speech reflect compassion in human relations? Do I respect the other person's free and responsible search for truth and meaning? His right of conscience? Is my behavior reflective of my belief in the democratic process? Do my attitudes help to move the world toward peace, liberty, and justice for all? Do I acknowledge the interdependent web of all political believers of which I am a part?

The second part of our survival requires action. Turn outward, and do everything you can that is consistent with our principles to bring about the world you want to see. As Susan B. Anthony said, "Cautious, careful people...never bring about a reform. Those who are really in earnest must...publicly and privately, in season and out, avow their sympathy with despised and persecuted ideas and their advocates, and bear the consequences."

Anne Lamott, the writer and humorist, who describes herself as a "reformed Christian," has offered these thoughts on survival:

Everything you need to know about how to bear up during these [30 days] is already inside you. Go within: Work on your own emotional acre. Stand still, and hurt, and feel crazy. Then drink a lot of water, pray, meditate, rest. Rest is a spiritual act.

Figure out the thing you can do every single day to be part of the solution, concentrating on the swing states. Money, walking precincts, registering voters, whatever. This is the only way miracles ever happen—left foot, right foot, left foot, breathe. Right foot, left foot, right foot, breathe. The great novelist E.L. Doctorow once said that writing a novel is like driving at night with the

headlights on: You can only see a little way in front of you, but you can make the whole journey this way. It is the truest of things; the only way to write a book, raise a child, save the world.

Laughter is carbonated holiness. It is chemo. So do whatever it takes to keep your sense of humor...

Call the loneliest person you know. Go flirt with the oldest person at the bookstore...Fill up a box with really cool clothes that you haven't worn in a year, and take it to a thrift shop. Take gray water outside and water whatever is growing on your deck. This is not a bad metaphor to live by. I think it is why we are here. Drink more fluids. And take very gentle care of yourself and the people you most love: We need you now more than ever ("A call to arms" salon.com).

The way to survival moves in a rhythm like breathing: inward to strengthen, outward to act. This balancing act is as old as Yom Kippur, as old as casting your bread upon the waters and turning the page of the book of life. "We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love" (SLT # 637).

You and I will survive the next thirty days.

When the market settles and the election is over, the fellowship will still be here. The nation will still be here. Returning to the landscape of the whole, holding up our piece of the structure that includes a block from every one of us, shielding ourselves from the clamor, coming together for comfort and support as we engage and challenge one another, we will keep our eyes on the near horizon of November 5 and on the far horizon of a world when all the people of the United States, all the people of the world, will be more just and more free.

You are Unitarian Universalist. Remember who you are. We are the people who embrace the heresy of diversity, the heresy of freedom, the heresy of rational thought, the heresy of peace with justice. We look to the time when justice will roll down like waters and peace like an ever flowing stream. And together we move toward that distant horizon.

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