

First Parish Unitarian Universalist, Bridgewater, MA
“Conservatively Liberal?”
Sunday, January 31, 2016 - 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation A neo-conservative is "a liberal who has been mugged by reality."
~ Irving Kristol

Reading “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,”
Reinhold Niebuhr, 1944

[Reinhold Niebuhr was an American theologian, ethicist, public intellectual, commentator on politics and public affairs, and professor at Union Theological Seminary for more than 30 years. His is best remembered for writing the Serenity Prayer:

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”]

The thesis of this volume grew out of my conviction that democracy has a more compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history. The excessively optimistic estimates of human nature and of human history with which the democratic credo has been historically associated are a source of peril to democratic society; for contemporary experience is refuting this optimism and there is danger that it will seem to refute the democratic ideal as well. A free society requires some confidence in the ability of men to reach tentative and tolerable adjustments between their competing interests and to arrive at some common notions of justice which transcend all partial interests. A consistent pessimism in regard to man's rational capacity for justice invariably leads to absolutistic political theories; for they prompt the conviction that only preponderant power can coerce the various vitalities of a community into a working harmony. But a too consistent optimism in regard to man's ability and

inclination to grant justice to his fellows obscures the perils of chaos which perennially confront every society, including a free society. In one sense a democratic society is particularly exposed to the dangers of confusion. If these perils are not appreciated they may overtake a free society and invite the alternative evil of tyranny. But modern democracy requires a more realistic philosophical and religious basis, not only in order to anticipate and understand the perils to which it is exposed; but also to give it a more persuasive justification. Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary. In all non-democratic political theories the state or the ruler is invested with uncontrolled power for the sake of achieving order and unity in the community. But the pessimism which prompts and justifies this policy is not consistent; for it is not applied, as it should be, to the ruler. If men are inclined to deal unjustly with their fellows, the possession of power aggravates this inclination. That is why irresponsible and uncontrolled power is the greatest source of injustice. The democratic techniques of a free society place checks upon the power of the ruler and administrator and thus prevent it from becoming vexatious. The perils of uncontrolled power are perennial reminders of the virtues of a democratic society; particularly if a society should become inclined to impatience with the dangers of freedom and should be tempted to choose the advantages of coerced unity at the price of freedom. The consistent optimism of our liberal culture has prevented modern democratic societies both from gauging

the perils of freedom accurately and from appreciating democracy fully as the only alternative to injustice and oppression. When this optimism is not qualified to accord with the real and complex facts of human nature and history, there is always a danger that sentimentality will give way to despair and that a too consistent optimism will alternate with a too consistent pessimism. I have not sought to elaborate the religious and theological convictions upon which the political philosophy of the following pages rests. It will be apparent, however, that they are informed by the belief that a Christian view of human nature is more adequate for the development of a democratic society than either the optimism with which democracy has become historically associated or the moral cynicism which inclines human communities to tyrannical political strategies.

Sermon “Conservatively Liberal?” Rev. Paul Sprecher

Once a great monastic order in a decaying monastery had only five monks left. The order was dying. In the surrounding deep woods, there was a little hut that a Rabbi from a nearby town used from time to time.

As the Abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to visit the Rabbi and see if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The Rabbi, alas, could only commiserate with him. “I know how it is,” he exclaimed. “The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town.

Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.” So the Abbot and the Rabbi sat together discussing the Bible and their respective faiths.

“It has been a wonderful visit,” said the Abbot as he was leaving, “but I have failed in my purpose. Is there nothing you can tell me to help save my dying order?”

“The only thing I can tell you,” said the Rabbi, “is that the Messiah is among you.”

When the Abbot returned to the monastery, he told the other monks that the Rabbi couldn't help. He continued, “The only thing he did say... was that the Messiah is among us. Though I don't know what that means.” The monks, too, wondered what this could mean.

The Messiah is among us? Could he possibly have meant that the Messiah is one of us monks here at the monastery? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even so, Elred is virtually always right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. Of course the Rabbi didn't mean me.

As they contemplated in this manner, the monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah and in turn, each monk began to treat himself with extraordinary respect.

It so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the beautiful forest and monastery. Without even being conscious of it, visitors began to sense a powerful spiritual aura. They were sensing the extraordinary respect that now filled the monastery.

Hardly knowing why, people began to come to the monastery frequently to picnic, to play, and to pray. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the older monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then, another and another asked if they too could join the abbot and older monks. Within a few years, the monastery once again became a thriving order, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.¹

We will all become perfect, none shall suffer ever more, and there will be peace in all the lands – when the Messiah comes. In the meantime....

Talking about politics from a religious point of view has been a long tradition in our New England parishes. Indeed, the custom down into the 1800's was to have a sermon just before elections to the legislature and other offices each year. They were undoubtedly sometimes jeremiads – denunciations of the evil ways into which citizens had fallen – but they also pointed the way to a better future. Gary Dorrien in his introduction to Niebuhr's *Children of Light and Children of Darkness* reports that

Niebuhr took for granted the activist orientation of the Social Gospel, even as he denounced Social Gospel idealism. He was deeply political, for which he never apologized; if people suffered because of politics and economics, Christian ethics had to deal with politics and economics. He was a brilliant interpreter of human fallibility, sin, and ambiguity. And he was always determined to be realistic, even during his Social Gospel pacifist phase, taking seriously that good and evil are inextricably linked in human nature and society.²

Religion has been defined from its etymology as “that which binds us back together.” At a time when religion seems more prone to tear us apart – whether in the supposed conflict between democratic values and all Muslims, or in the very real conflict between conservative and liberal religion, not to mention secularism – it behooves us to consider the ways in which liberal religious insights can contribute to binding us together. Otherwise we may well find ourselves locked in a dangerous and unwinnable battle like the one between the snipe and the oyster, or devolving into endless bickering because we just don’t like each other very much, like the monks in our story. One of the first questions every religion has to take on is the question of the nature of human beings: Are we lost souls who need salvation from some source outside ourselves? Or are we forgetful of our true nature until we submit to the rule of God? Or are we perfectible creatures provided that we attend to the development of our own and our children’s character?

Niebuhr tries to find a middle way between naïve optimism and authoritarian pessimism, and he finds that democracy – what we call in our fifth principle our “use of the democratic process” – is the only healthy way for us to resolve our differences; as he puts it, “Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

So let me offer five propositions that incline me to what I'm calling “Conservative Liberalism.”

First, most conservatives of whatever stripe are not stupid. Conservatism and even reaction have their reasons. Jonathan Haidt suggests in his book *The Righteous Mind*, which some of us read together last year, that we don't just reason our way to our political tendencies; in fact, he suggests, our varying temperaments are one of the more important determinants of our political and religious inclinations. Some of us are more attracted to novelty and to adventure; sometimes the language of “revolution” appeals, as one of the presidential candidates is demonstrating. Others are more worried about what radical change might bring about. The American Revolution was, on the whole, a very good thing. The French Revolution – and many others since, including the Russian Revolution – ran off the rails and created a degree of chaos that led more or less inevitably to authoritarian rule, and we can think also of Egypt in the transit from the Arab Spring back to authoritarian rule. Or, as Niebuhr would put it, the naïve optimism

of the revolutionaries – the Children of Light, as he dubs them – led to a reaction that empowered the authoritarian pessimism of the Children of Darkness.

Intelligible arguments can be made for most political preferences, but reason isn't the decisive factor in many of the political decisions we make, and even those with whom I most strongly disagree have their reasons – and their intelligence. Our naïve optimism sometimes leads us to believe that everyone would agree with us if only they were better educated. Some of this year's presidential candidates are very well educated indeed, but that has not made them more liberal.

My second proposition is that people aren't perfect, nor can they be perfected, nor will any human project or political scheme come out exactly as intended. When the Messiah comes, we and our works may become perfect, but in the meantime.... I am becoming more aware that the notion of original sin is a metaphor that has some real meaning in our understanding of human nature. I don't mean some inevitable hereditary stain, some utter wretchedness avoided only by the Virgin Mary and Jesus himself. I do mean that human beings from birth have within them some tendencies to selfishness – understandably – and that children are not, in fact, angels. Nor is progress inevitable or even uninterrupted. James Freeman Clarke, one of the most prominent Unitarian ministers of the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, offered these five points of Unitarian Theology as a counterpoint to the five points of Calvinist theology: “The fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and the

continuity of human development in all worlds, or, the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.” That naïve, optimistic liberal belief in “the progress of mankind onward and upward forever” was smashed to bits in the trenches of the Western Front of World War I.

Andrew Bard Schmookler in his book *Debating the Good Society* describes a dialog with a conservative friend about his frustration that his son Nathaniel is choosing to immerse himself in his Nintendo rather than reading or playing sports or stimulating his mind. He wonders why Nathaniel doesn't “just do the right thing on his own?” His friend replies, “Why on earth should it surprise you that your boy – four or five years out of diapers, his mother's milk scarcely dry on his lips – would choose badly? Or, to put it slightly differently, what is the belief that leads you to expect that a child would be trustworthy to use freedom wisely?”³

To put it more simply, neither infants nor adults are perfect nor are they utterly depraved. All of us inhabit some place along that range, and we move around in that spectrum at different times in our lives. Our very best and most generous plans for ourselves and for others inevitably have at least a hint of self-interest, and as a result many of our best-intentioned efforts fall just a little bit short of the mark, miss the bulls eye we intended by at least a little bit. As Niebuhr puts it in a passage quoted in our hymnal, “No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foes as it is in our own.”⁴

My third proposition is that Greed IS. I don't mean that "Greed is good," as Gordon Gekko says in that famous scene in the movie *Wall Street*. Nor do I mean that greed is bad, as many of us may believe in criticizing our economic system. I mean that we are by nature at least a little bit selfish. We are inclined – and properly so – to tend first to our own needs and those of our families, and it's not at all remarkable that some of us go overboard in seeking security and even great wealth. In other words, incentives matter. This is part of the genius of the marketplace and the famous supply and demand curves. When there's more oil in the market than demand, gas prices go down until there's a match between how much is produced and how much is consumed. Welfare programs do sometimes include perverse incentives, whether directed to businesses or to individuals. On the whole, though, markets are often the best mechanism for meeting human needs; and we can be proud of our American Free Enterprise system; it has in fact generated great prosperity.

Unfortunately, markets cannot by their nature encompass all of the goods and resources of the world. Notably, nature herself does not charge for her bounty, so too much greed – too much simple reliance on markets – can and does result in polluted air and water and land. Without good mechanisms to manage what nature gives us, things external to markets can be exploited without cost. So it behooves us to recognize that greed – or to be more accurate, self-interest – is a powerful force for creating the things we want and need and that markets can harness it in a

remarkably fashion; but markets also need boundaries set around them because they can, not infrequently, run amok.

My fourth proposition is that Explaining is not Excusing. Those of us who have been working at the Old Colony Correctional Center, or reading *The New Jim Crow*, or *Just Mercy*, have become acutely aware of how unfair life is for many of our fellow citizens. The new Jim Crow and the War on Drugs have resulted in mass incarceration to the point where we have more people in prison than any other nation on earth. It has resulted in a situation in which one-third of young African American men can expect to spend time in jail. It has resulted in a brutalization of our society that results in disproportionate police killings of African Americans and to a reaction against it in the Black Lives Matter movement. Lives are being ruined every day in our Inner Cities, and the ruin is often completed in punitive and violent prisons. We can understand how young African Americans and poor whites set out on destructive courses and how they come to commit criminal acts.

But understanding – explaining – does not mean excusing. Crime is crime. It is a breakdown in the order of society. At the same time, we affirm and promote in our first principle the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.” That doesn’t mean that every person is inherently *good*. It means that there is that of good in everyone. It doesn’t mean that we ought to empty our jails – that would be ruinous for our society. Unfortunately, we have created institutions in our mass

incarceration madness that are increasing criminality, not decreasing it. So we need to advocate for reforms that help to rehabilitate prisoners rather than promoting their propensity toward criminal behavior; to help to disrupt the school to prison pipeline; to generate employment opportunities that provide alternatives to the drug trade (another market driven by greed, by the way); and especially to make it possible for inmates as they are released to find ways to become productive rather than destructive members of our society.

Finally, Character Counts. We are all imperfect. We will not become perfect simply through self-culture (as our Unitarian ancestors sometimes thought). But Martin Luther King's dream "that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character" counts on the development of character. Some of us have stronger characters than others do, and some of us help our children to develop their character better than others do. Optimism sometimes holds that we are all just the same. Pessimism sometimes holds that some of us are just evil.

Conservative liberalism acknowledges that we are all on a journey and that its up to us to set a course toward a better character rather than a worse one; to serve as an example – though not a self-righteous example; and to help encourage others in the development of their own good character. We can't exactly subscribe to James Freeman Clarke's belief in "Salvation by Character" – some of us aren't quite sure what salvation might look like; but we can subscribe to the belief we can all

commit ourselves to our highest aspirations, the “better angels of our nature,” as Abraham Lincoln put it. Character counts, and character needs to be cultured.

I suspect that I may be the only one here who could subscribe to all of these propositions in detail, and there will probably come a time in my life when I won't, either. But perhaps they offer an opening to dialog, to a consideration of the shortsightedness and lack of perspective we can find among our friends and our foes. Perhaps they offer a direction to follow to achieve our sixth principle's goal of “world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” We all need reminding that each of us is neither completely one of the Children of Light nor of the Children of Darkness. And we have the potential to have more integrity, to be more loving, and to be more giving; although, alas, we will never be perfect, nor will we ever be quite as virtuous as we wish and imagine that we are – at least in the eyes of our friends and our foes.

As our opening hymn puts it, “so is life.”

May it be so, and amen.

¹ Adapted from *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* by Dr. M. Scott Peck and found online on 11/12/10 at <http://www.ordinarypeoplechangetheworld.com/articles/the-rabbis-gift.aspx>

² "Introduction" by Gary Dorrien to Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011 (First Published 1944), p. x, Kindle edition.

³ Andrew Bard Schmookler, *Debating the Good Society: A Quest to Bridge America's Moral Divide*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999, pp. 6 & 7.

⁴ *Singing the Living Tradition*, “We Must be Saved,” Reinhold Niebuhr, #461.