

“The Ballot Box As Remembrance, Vision, Prayer”

Let me ask us to begin by pulling out our grey hymnals,

Turning to Hymn #1,

And then turn back one page to page on our left that begins:

*“We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association,
Covenant to affirm and promote:*

And say with me the line that begins *“The right...”*

*“The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within
Our congregations and in society at large;*

And say with me the next principle:

“The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.”

And with those words in mind come on a journey with me.

It is two weeks ago on Monday, October 22nd,

You are next to me in my 11-year-old blue Subaru,

And there is list of ‘to-do’s’ in hand – first the hardware store

Where Al, the long-time employee sells me the sand so I can

Relay the patio before winter.

“You hear about the storm that’s coming? He says.

They say it could be bad!”

Little did we know.

Then to the general store to pick up face paint for Halloween.

Then Market Basket to do the weekly shop, where I saw

Three of you in the isles and to your credit and mine we didn’t talk church
once.

And then, driving home, you there in the passenger seat,
The last thing on the list, four letters: V-O-T-E.
Why so early? Because tomorrow I will be leaving for New Orleans
To join our crew from this congregation already down there
To help rebuild from that other hurricane that blew through 7 years ago.
Who knows? Maybe what's happened in New Jersey and New York
will mean that we add them to our list,
because there is so much need, isn't there?
Sometimes I think all the tragedies in the world paralyze us,
Because they are so big and we feel so small.
And when we do feel that paralysis we can remember
the words of Edward Everett Hale,
Unitarian minister whose statue is downtown in the Public Garden,
Who said about his abolition work in the mid-1800's:
*"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do
something.*
And because I cannot do everything,
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."

The old, sturdy Subaru, the one that has been with me from our first days
Of parenting, from the first days of ministry here all the way up until now,
And reminds me how cars and houses aren't just cars and houses,
That they are also like little magic boxes full of memories,
Little temples full of important moments,
Which is why all this wreckage from Sandy is so tragic,
pulls up outside the Holliston Town House.

First floor, second floor to the clerk's office.

"Yes, here for an absentee ballot," I say,
and the woman, smiling, hands me the sheet of paper and
Points her finger to the curtained ballot booth
Off in the corner.

How often do I take this for granted, I think,
How often do I not prayerfully consider this act of voting
that others have fought so hard for?

Those who say they don't vote because their vote won't make a difference
Miss the point that maybe, just maybe voting isn't all about them;
It's also about remembering and honoring those who made it possible for us.

As I pull back the curtains and walk inside
And pick up the #2 pencil I am aware of a presence
Beside me, peering over my shoulder.
Maybe you have this experience, too,
The presence of a loved one who gave us some of our values
And taught us right from wrong, just from the unjust.

"Nathan," says the presence, and instantly I know it to be
The voice of my grandfather,
who died 5 years ago this very week,
World War II Veteran turned inner-city high school principal
Turned pacifist, Christian Scientist turned Unitarian Universalist
(thanks to me).

"Nathan, who and what are you going to vote for?"

Make me proud, Nathan!

Ever have that experience?

One of the things I miss most about him, Warren was his name,
Was his phone calls from his retirement condo down in Florida.

“Nathan, you see the news lately?!!

And then he would rail about this policy or that politician.

“Oh Nathan, I can’t believe he did that!,

I can’t believe she said that!” he would say,

And I swear he could sense through the phone whether

I was agreeing with him or not.

Having raised three boys on a teacher’s salary,

Having taught kids who were white and poor, and black and poor,

Having grown up in the Depression with a single mom

And 4 other siblings who needed food and warmth and shelter,

it would have broken his heart and unleashed his temper

to learn how much money is being spent on the congressional

and presidential elections this year,

the most ever, at an estimated \$5.8 billion dollars.

“I have a modest proposal!” he would say, his finger pointed to the sky.

“A modest proposal –

To spend one dollar on the poor for every campaign dollar raised.

How’s that moving forward, Mr. Obama! How’s that for change, Mr.

Romney!

So Grandpa Warren is there in ballot booth with me, peering over my
shoulder.

“Hi Grandpa.”

And next to him, others around me, the old gang from BU seminary -
Isaiah, Micah, Amos, Jeremiah, Hosea.

On the Wednesday morning after the 2000 election
(remember that? – pregnant chads, hanging chads, election undecided for
weeks)

I had to show up to class early for a test on the Hebrew Prophets.

Outside the window that morning on Commonwealth Ave.

Students were waking up to an uncertain world and a divided democracy,

A world that had yet to know 9/11 and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,

But on the pages of my blue book exam I was quoting Isaiah, saying

“they shall beat their swords into plowshares,

and their spears into pruning hooks;

and nation shall not lift their sword up against nation.

And quoting Amos, saying *“seek good and not evil, that you may live...*

And establish justice in the gate.”

And quoting Jeremiah, who could have speaking of Staten Island

And Hoboken, New Jersey this morning, saying

“In the towns that are desolate, without inhabitants,

there shall once more be heard the voice of gladness.”

All these years later, standing there in the booth with the #2 pencil in my
hand,

The prophets remind me how there are plenty of people,

Oh how many there are!,

Who speak for the partisans,

But precious few who speak for the soul -

Precious few who bear witness against unnecessary destruction,

Precious few who are not afraid to utter phrases like *climate change*
and *poverty*

And *peace* when almost all of our politicians seem to be,
Precious few who testify to the beauty and tenderness in life,
The tragedies and terror,
Precious few who call upon the strength of spirit to reach out beyond
real disagreement to our neighbors saying E Pluribus Unum,
“Out of Many, One.”

As I mark the circles, one after the other, one after the other,
This I know from the prophets,
That as a religious person it is my work and it is your work
To help hold our politicians accountable to a vision that includes
The least and the lost, the damaged and the disenfranchised.
In the booth I’m pressing my pencil harder now,
The preacher is coming out, and when I can’t decide
On a candidate I’m tempted to write in the names on the blank
Lines provided – *Isaiah, Micah, Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah.*
Now that would be something, wouldn’t it!

The booth is getting crowded now, all these people,
All these prophets,
But still more are coming in.
As I hold the tip of my pencil above the referendum about assisted suicide,
The faces of people I have known at the bedside surround me,
The people I have seen in my ministry who have suffered and may,
If the option were there, have taken those pills to ease them

More gently to the end.

But next to those are those I remember from my last years in high school
When I took phone calls from people at risk for suicide,
Coaxing them with words and listening to step back from
This decision that is impossible to take back.
Pencil above the circles,
I am nearly paralyzed with how complicated
My feelings are,
How little trust I have for the government to administer this well,
How troubled I am that the people who may most want these pills –
People with severe Alzheimer's and ALS – are the very ones
Who won't be able to get them because their illnesses
incapacitate them too much.
With prayer I mark my selection,
Knowing that people on both sides come to their discernment
With faith, with moral imagination, and often,
With deep ambivalence.

I hear a man outside the booth shuffling his feet, clearly impatient
For me to hurry up and get voting.
But these things can't be rushed; too much is at stake.
Last big issue on my ballot – medical marijuana –
And again more faces come in the ballot with me –
The MS sufferers I know, the spinal injured patients I know,
Saying, *'just give me some comfort here; is this really a big deal?'*
And the other faces, mine in the mirror, of the devastation

I have seen in my own extended family from drug abuse.

As I hold the pencil above the paper, I try to not

Let my own hurt and fear make my decision for me,

And yet it is so hard.

This issue in particular reminds me how the act of voting

Is a fallible system conducted by fallible people (me and you)

Seeking to elect fallible candidates who write fallible laws.

And so a little compassion and little forgiveness are in order,

For myself and for all of us.

Pencil is much duller now than when I started;

I have been pressing so hard, as if the blacker my mark

The deeper and more emphatic and more certain all my votes will become.

As I put the pencil down and check the paper over one last time

And slide into the dark disappearing slot,

I am reminded of the moment from my Catholic childhood

When, during mass, we would write our prayers of petition on little

Slips of paper and the ushers would collect them with the offering

And give them to Father Hess up front before us all.

This feels a little like those moments, and so before I slide

The curtain back and greet the impatient voter

who is waiting for me to finish,

This I pray, adapted from words I first heard from 20-something

Jena Nardella, who prayed at the opening night of the Democratic

National Convention.

Dear Spirit of our many names and private longings and public visions,

I pray for President Obama and Governor Romney,
That both will know the presence of the Holy as they serve as leaders,
As husbands, as fathers. May they seek justice, love mercy,
And walk humbly with you.

And I pray for our country in these next days –
May we make our children proud of how we conduct ourselves.
We know our human tendencies toward finger-pointing and self-
righteousness.

May our better selves prevail.

And I pray, Spirit, for the humility to listen our brothers and sisters across
The political spectrum,
Because this holy kingdom is not divided into Red States and Blue States.
Equip us with the moral imagination to have real dialogue,
And knit us as one country as wrestle over the complexity of how we ought
To live and govern,
For we know that we are bound up in one another.

And finally give us wisdom as we enter and leave the polling place,
To discover honest solutions because we know it will take all of us –
Democrat, Republican, Green and Libertarian – to care for the sick
And the lonely, the widow and the orphan, the downtrodden and the
unemployed,
The prisoner and the homeless,
The stranger and the enemy, the thirst and the powerless.

As we conclude this election season, please repeat after me these words

We know from St. Francis.

Lord, make us instruments of peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light,

And where there is sadness, joy.

Amen.

First Reading

My favorite news of the week, the one that offered balm

In the midst of all the storm news and campaign news,

Was of the little girl in Denver who is shown on YouTube

Crying. And why are you crying, asked her mother?

‘Because I’m so tired of hearing about Barack Obama and Mitt Romney’

After that, the mom switched the channel from NPR to Neil Young.

We’re all feeling like that little girl, right?

Enough campaign speeches and stump words.

So this morning we turn to the original truth-tellers who spoke

Without spin to their often unwilling, uncooperative audiences.

Who do I speak of? I speak of the Hebrew prophets,

Who in these words that Carly Baker Peggy Homer will read,

Offer us a dream and a vision that goes beyond all the partisan words:

(Peggy) From Micah: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

(Carly) From Amos: “Seek good and not evil, that you may live... Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate.”

(Peggy) From Hosea: “I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety.”

(Carly) From Jeremiah: “In the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without inhabitants, human or animal, there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride.”

(Peggy) From Isaiah: "I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you... You are precious in my sight... Do not fear, for I am with you."

Second Reading:

Our second reading comes Jim Wallis, a Progressive Evangelical Christian (you didn't know such breed existed, did you?

They do; repeat after me: *Progressive....Evangelical...Christian*),

Who after the 2004 election wrote a book that I rests on

My center bookshelf during everyone political season

Called "Gods Politics: Why the Right Gets its Wrong and the

Left Doesn't Get It."

Observing that when our public life falters or fails,

It is usually for a lack of vision,

Wallis concludes his book with a list of predictions for the new millennium

That we are now 12 years into.

Peggy and Carly will read a few of them:

(Peggy) – Faith in the new millennium will be defined much more by action Than by doctrine.

(Carly) – At the same time, religious fundamentalism will continue to rise in the face of moral decline.

(Peggy) – The Religious Right will lose control of the discussion of religion and public life and other voices will be heard.

(Carly) – The Secular Left will give up its hostility to religion and spirituality, or it will die.

(Peggy) – The Spice Girls won't be remembered, and Martin Luther King Jr. will.

(Carly) – Overcoming poverty will become the great moral issue as we move into the new millennium.

(Peggy) – The unfinished agenda of racism will be impossible to ignore in the face of increasing diversity.

(Carly) – The need for prophetic religion will grow.

(Peggy) – The concept of Sabbath will see a great comeback in the lives of overstressed and overworked people.

(Carly)- Hope will be the most essential ingredient for social change.

