

But *How Do I Love My Neighbor?*
Otto O'Connor, Ministerial Intern
23 October 2016

So I came across a news article recently about something called "Election Stress Disorder." Have you heard of it?

So apparently, the American Psychological Association recently did a study in which they found that 52% of Americans found the upcoming election to be a significant source of stress in their lives.

52% is a rather large percentage of people who are walking around in this world carrying some additional source of stress in their lives due to this election. There's a pretty good chance that many of *you* are experiencing this election as a significant source of stress.

Now some news sources claim that the APA has named this "Election Stress Disorder," though I could not find that name on their own report of the phenomenon. I have to admit I wonder, with 52% of people responding saying that it's a significant source of stress, is it really a disorder?

I know / most certainly am feeling stressed about it. It feels like everywhere I turn there is news of this Presidential election. It's in my car when I turn on NPR. Whenever I open my Facebook, it feels like my news feed is full of articles about the election. On Thursday night I was at the rock climbing gym *trying to just get away* for a few hours, and the people climbing next to me wouldn't stop talking about Wednesday night's debate! Is nothing sacred?

(And yes, I'm aware that some of you might have come to *church* today to get a break from election. And I heard that. And, um, I'm sorry, bear with me.)

It's just that it's *everywhere* and it's exhausting. Right?

Lynn Bufka, the American Psychological Association's Associated Executive Director for Policy and Research said that "Election stress becomes exacerbated by arguments, stories, images and video on social media that can heighten concern and frustration, particularly with thousands of comments that can range from factual to hostile or even inflammatory,"

And I think that this all just adds to how divisive this election can be. There is an us versus them mentality that really seems to pervade most discussions I see of the election.

And if you think "Gosh, if only those people understood how stressful this is for me," you might be surprised to learn that, according to this study, Democrats and Republicans are equally likely to find this election to be a significant source of stress. Finally something we can all agree on!

But I think when people talk about the us versus them that happens in elections, they sometimes miss the bigger pictures. And that's that it's not just about Republicans versus Democrats or Trump supporters versus Clinton supporters (and yes, I'm aware that those groups are not the same thing), but about many more divisions than that.

There are divides within the parties. The people voting for one of the two major are wondering how people can throw away their votes on third party candidates and put the results of the election in jeopardy. People voting for third party candidates are wondering how people can throw away their votes on candidates who don't line up with their deeper values. And everyone who knows who they are voting for are wondering how on earth anyone could still be undecided in an election like this. And those who are undecided are wondering how anyone can have such clarity on something that matters so much. And those who are committed to voting are wondering how anyone can be so apathetic as to not even vote in a race as important as this.

How do I love my neighbor, indeed.

It feels like people are just so angry at anyone who isn't doing exactly what they are, whatever that is. And the media and the echo chambers of our own social circles aren't helping.

Furthermore, we might actually think we live in more of a bubble than we do. You can't tell someone's political beliefs or who they are voting for just by looking at them. You be surprised who you might disagree with.

Well, this, my friends, is democracy. In the words of Winston Churchill, "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

Well, we Unitarian Universalists have what you might call a special interest in democracy. It's in one of our principles (which can be found in the front of the gray hymnal), the fifth one which states "The right to conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and society at large."

And I have to be honest I really hated this principle for a while.

You see, in 2008, the same year Obama was elected for the first time, I had the privilege of working on a political campaign for a ballot initiative in California. The Supreme Court in California has just legalized same-sex marriage. Opponents of this put a measure on the ballot in that would write an amendment into the constitution of the state that said "only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California." This measure, which would become known as Proposition 8, was an extremely expensive campaign, with over \$70 million dollars being poured into both sides from all over the country.

In case it's not clear, I was working on the "no" side, the side that wanted to keep same sex marriage legal in California (remember, you can't tell someone's political leanings just by looking at them), and it was actually through volunteering at my UU church that ended up with this job. But it was a hard and difficult campaign to work for. The rights of a segment of the population were up to a vote. And I just didn't believe that was right. I still don't.

In any case, the Proposition passed and the next day, California stopped issuing marriage licenses to same sex couples. Because, with a turnout of almost 80% of the California electorate, 52% voted against same sex marriage.

And those of us who worked on the campaign? We were just devastated. I remember going to the campaign office that next day and everyone was crying. It didn't matter if you were LGBTQ or not, everyone who worked in that office was crying. "They voted against US," I remember someone said.

That's that us versus them talk again. Elections really bring that thinking out.

How can we love our neighbors in moments like this? Is it possible to have compassion in moments like this?

The next month, I was slated to teach a class on children at my church about our Fifth Principle, that one with democracy in it. A friend from church said to me "how ironic, following what just happened with Proposition 8." In the end, I had to back out from doing it. I just didn't know how to say something positive about democracy when over half the state had voted to take right away from a minority group. To take away rights from me.

So tell me how, how can we love our neighbors when we disagree with them so much? And how so I love my neighbor if I feel like their beliefs are hurting me, or hurting people I love. Did I have to concede that maybe they were right? Did I have to consider their opinion?

But you see, I was wrong about that principle. I was so focused on the democracy part, that I forgot the first part of it, "the right of conscience." The right to speak your mind. The right to say that "hey, this isn't ok. I don't think we should be voting on people's rights."

And that's where these two parts of the principle strike an important balance. Democracy means that every person has a say, in the process, in electing our elected officials. But it *also* means that you get to speak your mind when you believe in something.

It means that, regardless of the outcome of the election, this church will continue to display our new banner, proclaiming Black Lives Matter, because we are speaking our conscience.

It means that, regardless of the outcome of the election, we will continue the work for the environment. We will continue to fight sexism. We will continue to fight Islamophobia. We will

continue the work for the causes we believe in. Because no matter what happens, there will be work to do.

Ok, I hear you saying, “but that's not helping with my Election Stress Disorder!”

Fair enough. So let's go back and read some of the suggestions from the American Psychological Association's website regarding handling election stress. Here they are.

1. Limit your media consumption. Read just enough to be informed.
2. Avoid getting into discussions about the election with family, friends, and coworkers if you think they might escalate into conflict.
3. Channel your concerns to make a positive difference on issues you care about. Consider volunteering in your community, advocating for an issue you support or joining a local group.
4. Remember that our political system and the three branches of government mean that we can expect a significant degree of stability immediately after a major transition of government.
5. And five – Get out there and vote.

Now, these are all helpful suggestions and I hope you take them into consideration when caring for yourself during the election seasons. But I would humbly like to add a suggestion: Compassion. Compassion for yourself and for those whose view point you don't understand.

Let me give you an example. Have you seen the video of Canadians telling America it's great?

It starts off with shots of what seem to be every day Canadians at their computers making videos saying things like “Hey, guys. We're just up here in Canada talking about how great you guys are down there. We thought we'd just send you a little bit of a love note.”

They go on to remind Americans that it has done amazing things like invent the internet, entertain them, and inspire them to activism.

It's a funny little message from our neighbors up north. And now would probably be a good time to remind you, if you didn't know, that I'm Canadian. And despite being about the United States of America, this is a really Canadian video. They are all just so darn polite about it. “You really are great” they say as the video ends.

And, as a Canadian, one who has chosen to make this country my home, I really can't deny the truth of what they are saying. I really do love this country.

But, then again, I should probably remind you that I am *also* American. I hold dual citizenship with both countries. So while I was born and lived for the first 18 years of my life in another country, I *also* retain the same civic privileges and responsibilities as many of you do. Which means I get to vote.

So I have this interesting conundrum of being both an insider and an outsider in this election.

Except – and I’m not really sure how clear this is to most Americans – Canadians don’t really feel that much like outsiders to this process. Most of my conversations with my friends and family have revolved around this election. And I can tell you that they are feeling similar levels of anxiety and fear as we are. And growing up, Canadians certainly never said much that was nice about Americans.

But the truth is, despite shockingly high number of my American friends who propose marriage in an election year should things not go their way, Canadians feel very invested in what happens, and have even less control of it than we do.

So I think it’s interesting that in a moment of uncertainty, these Canadians choose to speak to Americans from a place of compassion.

And here’s the thing. I’m not sure how much this video actually helps Americans. From my, admittedly small sample, of friends, it’s the Canadians who seem to love the video so much. I can tell that it makes the Canadians in them feel just a little more at peace with a process they have no control over.

You see because compassion is something we can feel in our bodies. When we have compassion for those we disagree with, when we have compassion for our neighbors, we can experience a sense of calm.

So how do you love your neighbor with compassion?

Loving your neighbor does not mean you don’t get to be angry. It’s ok to feel angry. It’s ok to express that anger. It’s ok to feel that someone else’s viewpoint isn’t ok and to feel angry about that. And it’s your responsibility to direct your anger into productive ways of handling a disagreement. If you are angry that Black Lives don’t seem to Matter, take action! If you are angry about income inequality, take action!

Loving your neighbor does not mean you don’t say you disagree. It means you say you disagree in love. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to tell someone we disagree with them.

Loving your neighbor means not assuming you know how they are going to vote, just because they live in Massachusetts, or support LGBTQ rights, or go to this church. Loving your neighbor means realizing that, like many things about ourselves, our political identities are not readily visible, and not always what people might assume.

Loving your neighbor means listening to them with an open heart. It also means exercising your right to take a stand.

Loving your neighbor means having the compassion to recognize the humanity we all share, in this stressful time of the election. Let us remember that, there really is not us versus them. There is only us.

This election has taken a toll on us all. It hits at issue that are at the very core of who we are as people and who we are as a country.

Let us practice compassion for ourselves, for each other, and for the world.

May it be so. Let us say together, amen.