

It's All in the Telling

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These have been an eventful few weeks, and I don't think I'm alone when I say that I'm still reeling, still responding, still trying to figure things out. Of course, of all the earth-shattering events of the past few weeks, the one that was the most earth-shattering, especially to New Englanders, was ... the Red Sox winning the World Series!

It was an event that seemed to shift the axis of this old "Hub of the Universe," making us believe that yes, miracles do happen. And it's sent Red Sox Nation off to write a new story about the team they love. The "story that they're in" can no longer be told from the vantage of the underdog. They've got to rewrite, rework, and reframe. They won, but at the same time they lost a story that made them unique.

But in the same way that the earth eclipsed the moon the night of that fateful game, just one week later, the *election* eclipsed the Sox, and Massachusetts shifted from Red Sox jubilation to blue state despair.

Living in one of the "bluest" states around, we can now get to feeling like we're not the Hub, but simply a humble satellite, in the American political universe. Out there, riding along in our peripheral orbit, we shout to the center, "Hey, what about the facts? Doesn't anyone care about the facts?" "Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with September 11th!" we shout. "Gay Marriage has to do with equal protection under the law," we holler. "Our schools can't afford another tax cut!" we cry. As the sounds of our blue Commonwealth hurtle through space, some antennae pick them up. Others don't even hear them at all—their radios aren't tuned to the same frequency.

Now here in this congregation, our radios are not all tuned to the same political frequency. Our members tune in to a number of different stations on the political spectrum. No matter where we each might be politically, or how each of us might have voted, I think I can speak to a common experience when I say: our nation's division hurts. The way it's being framed in the media, we are a country divided. The right and the left each think that the other side is ridiculous, contradictory, irrational, foolish at best and dangerous at worst. When the two sides try to talk to each other about politics, it's like they don't even speak the same language.

I had an experience like this the weekend before the election while helping my grandfather sort his mail. He's a pretty conservative fellow, and has contributed to various right-wing causes over the years so his address has been sold to pretty much every right-wing political action committee in the country. Reading their fundraising letters, I became aware of just how embedded I was in my own—more liberal—worldview. To me, John Kerry was fairly moderate. To these organizations, he was a "dangerous radical" poised to destroy America. Grampy and I exchanged some jokes and teased each other a bit, but it was clear that when it came to politics, we had completely different frames of reference. We weren't operating with the same basic

assumptions. Though we're both smart, highly educated, and from the same family, we don't think alike. And no matter how much we love each other, or how much we talk things through, I just don't think we're ever gonna agree.

I've been reading an author these days who has helped me gain some clarity on exactly why this is. His name is George Lakoff and he's a cognitive scientist at the University of California, Berkeley. He studies how people's brains categorize data and how they put it to use in politics.

Lakoff demonstrates that the field of cognitive science has upended some common assumptions about how people make up their minds. A major—false—assumption is, “If we just tell people the facts, since people are basically rational beings, they'll all reach the right conclusions. But,” Lakoff says, “we know from cognitive science that people do not think like that. People think in frames... To be accepted, the truth must fit people's frames. If the facts do not fit a frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce off.” A frame is a preconceived understanding you have in your head—it is a long-term concept that structures how you think. Frames force a certain logic. For example, some president I know of tends to view foreign policy through the a frame of “good and evil.” Whatever happens on the international stage gets interpreted and articulated through this frame. “Axis of Evil,” etcetera.

Now some liberals like to think that they've got the facts on their side and it's the conservatives with the frames that ignore the facts. But lots of conservatives think that about liberals, too. I remember on the first day of the current war in Iraq, I saw a young man protesting the protesters. His sign said, “Hey hippies, try reading a history book!” When I walked past him, he looked at me (your classic hippie) and said “I beg you—just one history book!”

Everybody's got their facts, and everybody's got their frames. Though all “facts” are not created equal, we can't pretend that it's only the people who we disagree with that filter their facts.

Lakoff argues that it's not primarily facts that drive people to one political affiliation or another. Rather, it's metaphors. Deep, underlying metaphors that influence our identity and with whom we identify. Conservative politics, he argues, are held together by a metaphor of the nation as a Strict Father, under a Strict Father God. Liberal politics are likewise held together by a parental metaphor: that of the nation as a Nurturing Parent, replete with a Nurturing Parent deity. Each of these metaphoric parents loves their children, yet they have different ways of doing so. Lakoff claims we use these metaphors as conceptual frames to organize our ideas about family, nation, and God.

Now before I get too deeply into these metaphors, let me explain one caveat: not everyone who is on the left or the right resonates with these metaphors 100%! Each of us has some of the Strict Father and some of the Nurturing Parent framework in our minds. And some may use one model at home and prefer another for politics. So don't take it too literally—this is metaphor!

The strict father framework goes something like this:

The world is a dangerous place, and always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in

the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore they have to be made good. What is needed in this kind of a world is a strong, strict father who can:

- *Protect the family in the dangerous world*
- *Support the family in the difficult world, and*
- *Teach his children right from wrong.*

Children must be taught obedience and discipline through punishment. Their internalized discipline will enable them to prosper in the world and be self-reliant. If they prosper financially they are deserving of their wealth and should not have to share it with people who lack discipline.

The nurturing parent framework goes something like this:

Children are born good and can be made better. The world can be made a better place, and it is our job to work on that. The parents' job is to nurture their children and to prepare their children to be nurturers of others.

Nurturance means *empathy and responsibility*.¹

Because parents are responsible, they protect children by making the world safer. Because parents are empathetic, they want their children to be fulfilled and happy people. The children know best who they are destined to become. In order to prosper, children must live in a fair environment where everyone is free to be who they truly are.

Different, eh?

A whole host of issues link to each of these metaphors—they unify the disparate and somewhat contradictory packages of positions that are considered “Conservative” and “Liberal” in America. They create a connection between ideas that might not fit together otherwise, like repeal of the Estate Tax and prayer in public school or gun control and gay rights. Skillful politicians employ these metaphors to their advantage.

These ideas suggest to me that if we want to begin to bridge the divide in this country we can't simply brush up on our facts and prepare for debate. Rather, we have to understand, and use, metaphor. We have to look at how it operates in our own minds and the minds of others. And what better place to start than at church. Because here, we're in the metaphor business.

I'm teaching a course here on Thursday nights called “Making Spiritual Meaning.” This past Thursday, each participant shared a spiritual autobiography that he or she had written over the previous week. I was deeply moved, listening to them share the joys and sorrows, peaks and valleys of their lives, and how each turning affected their religion and spirituality. Everyone in the class, like many of you, did not start out their lives as Unitarian Universalists. Rather, they were brought up in other faith traditions, or none at all. I asked whether there were any

¹ Italicized text is from Lakoff, George. *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004.

overarching themes or metaphors to their stories. Each articulated their theme or metaphor in a slightly different way, but it was clear that what they had in common was increasing openness and increasing realizations of interrelatedness.

One person described his spiritual life as a journey upon which preconceived notions and fixed realities are continually broken apart, with new experiences dissolving old prejudices. Another described her journey as one of increasing connection and relationship: with people, with earth, with the divine. Another described a passionate commitment to the outcast, the other, that forms the basis for a spiritual life of action and service.

This morning's first reading asked, "What kind of story are we in?"

I believe it is, largely, "the kind of story we are in" that determines not only our political outlooks, but also our religious and spiritual experience. Yes, experience can affect the story (as many of you, who left the faith of your upbringing, well know.) But the *story* profoundly affects the *experience*.

Although we each come into this meetinghouse this morning with different lives and different stories, by participating in this religious community we enter into a story of Unitarian Universalism. Though we're not an extremely metaphorical faith tradition, we do have some stories and metaphors that frame our faith.

The preface to any Unitarian Universalist story is that it's a story that acknowledges pluralism, diversity, and multiple valid interpretations. This is not to say that all interpretations are equal. But we certainly know that there's not any one way to be religious and not any one way to be Unitarian Universalist.

The background to the story has to do with who has been here before us, who we "fall into communion with." In the words of Dr. Rebecca Parker,

By our act—for example our act of being here, our act of worshipping in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, our act of structuring our life together to give room for the experience, voice and vote of each person, our act of joining together to resist injustice—by these acts, ... "our spirits have fallen into communion..."

We've fallen into communion with the feisty, free-spirited Puritans of four hundred and fifty years ago who advocated freedom of religious conscience, and resisted the oppressive powers of church and state. We've fallen into communion with the people who believe revelation is not sealed. ... We've fallen into communion with the sweet-spirited Universalists of old who rejected a notion of God as a tyrant ruling by the threat of hell, and named God as a gracious, creative presence, who saves all through the power of Love. We've fallen into communion with the deep-feeling Transcendentalists insisting that religion cannot be found in the dry bones of the past but must be discovered first hand. We've fallen into communion with the Iowa Sisterhood [of Unitarian women ministers], and all those women and men who have argued and advocated for the rights and full humanity of women. We've fallen into communion with the all-embracing

mystics who see truth manifest in the diverse religious traditions of earth's people, and mysteries revealed in the trees and the stars. And, we've fallen into communion with courageous Humanists who dare to lift up the dignity and strength of human beings, the power and importance of critical reason, in a world that prefers the abrogation of human agency, and uncritical obedience to false gods.²

Each of these people, and movements, has contributed to the story you and I find ourselves in today. It is an ongoing story—we participate in it, we live it.

Of the seven principles that Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote, only one contains a metaphor, “Respect for the *interdependent web* of all existence, of which we are a part.” It's a great metaphor, the interdependent web. Because it can remind us that our words and our actions have an affect on the world, for good or for bad. It can remind us that our fates are inextricably linked with the rest of this planets' inhabitants.

Next to the metaphor of the web I would add the metaphor of the family tree—the tree of life—that shows we all spring from the same root so many millions of years ago. Whether our nation, or our god, is a strict father or a nurturing parent, we *are* all in the same family. I find that the deeper into Unitarian Universalism I get, the more profoundly I realize that we are all related. And that “we” keeps growing. And as the “we” grows so does my resolve to resist oppression and work for justice, equity, and compassion.

These religious metaphors—these frames—have moral implications. If we are all interdependent—if we are all related—we must learn to live as a family. Now we may argue about what kind of family that's going to be and who's going to parent it. Even people in the same literal family don't come to consensus on that one: when it comes to politics, my grandfather and I will never agree.

But we can all work on *learning to love each other better*. When I say “each other” I don't just mean Unitarian Universalists. I mean us and the people we agree with, and the people we don't agree with. I mean everyone, I mean the earth. I mean the family tree, I mean the interconnected web. We must learn to love.

Loving one another does not mean agreeing. Or approving. Or even creating harmony. It's not about putting a bumper sticker on your car that says “I ♥ George Bush,” just because he's the president. The kind of love I speak of manifests itself in a respect for each person's worth and dignity. It is embodied in a recognition of the spark of divinity in each being.

Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about this kind of love:

When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is

² Parker, Rev. Dr. Rebecca. “What they dreamed be ours to do” Address. General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, Rochester, NY, 1998.

beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: 'Let us love one another, for love is God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God.'

Our nation feels divided. Do not despair, retract, or hide. Instead, get in touch with your metaphors. Reflect on what story you are in. And act from that. Speak from that. That is your truth—an even more profound truth than the facts behind the story. Build community, and love. As our closing reading promises, “The strength we gather will be our salvation.”

Please join in reading responsively Reading #576 in the back of your hymnal, “A Litany of Restoration.”

If, recognizing the interdependence of all life, we strive to build community, the strength we gather will be our salvation. If you are black and I am white,

It will not matter.

If you are female and I am male,

It will not matter.

If you are older and I am younger,

It will not matter.

If you are progressive and I am conservative,

It will not matter.

If you are straight and I am gay,

It will not matter.

If you are Christian and I am Jewish,

It will not matter.

If we join spirits as brothers and sisters, the pain of our aloneness will be lessened, and that does matter.

In this spirit, we build community and move toward restoration.

In this spirit, we learn to love. Amen, and blessed be.

Please join in singing hymn #325, “Love Makes a Bridge.”