

TAKING YOUR TURN IN THE CHANNEL

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach

Sunday, April 18, 2010

I have an old friend – her name is Pat – who is able to trace her family’s Huguenot roots back to 17th Century France. The Huguenots -- some of you may know -- were a protestant reformation sect who (like so many other European religious minorities, including some of our Unitarian forbearers) were mercilessly persecuted by the established Roman church, and were finally forced (those who had not already killed) to flee France altogether. The story about their escape -- which has been orally passed down in my friend’s family for generations – is that her Huguenot ancestors were jammed into a tiny boat, and were forced to row toward England across the choppy and treacherous channel. As they began to row for their lives (her family’s lore tells it) it became painfully clear that there were just too many people in the small vessel. Unless something was done (and done quickly) the boat would swamp, and all would perish in the frigid channel. So what did they do? Did they:

- Draw lots and throw the losers overboard?
- Set upon the elderly, the sick or the defenseless young and toss them to a watery death?
- Decide (by some sort of rational spread sheet) who were the least productive members of the community and force them out of the boat?

I suppose they could have decided on any of these more-or-less logical courses of action. But these beleaguered Huguenots did something else, something far nobler and lovelier. Without discussion or dissention, the people in the tiny boat decided that they would **TAKE TURNS** (several of them at a time) **swimming along side the craft**. For the many hours of that cruel crossing, as swimmers tired, others would – quietly...willingly...as members of their tight-knit community – take their place in the numbing waters. And thus it was that the small boat – and everyone who had sought refuge on it – survived the treacherous crossing.

Now when I first heard this remarkable story from my friend, I was deeply moved by it, and have never forgotten it. I have never forgotten it because it communicates -- to my heart and mind at least – **a precious, first ethic and principle** for our human family. For you see those beleaguered Huguenots -- by means of **COMPASSIONATE COMMUNITY MINDEDNESS, a simple moral commitment to the welfare of all, that arose from an intuitive and indissoluble sense of their knowing that they belonged to one another in a fundamental way** – those Huguenots arrived safely on the shores of England, and (my friend Pat tells me) prospered down the generations since. I believe this story about the members of a community together willingly **“TAKING THEIR TURN IN THE CHANNEL” for one another’s survival is a desperately needed metaphor for just how we Americans must learn to compassionately organize our common life (how we must envision our social contract if you will) if we are to survive (and succeed) as a nation (and a people) in this 21st Century.**

Let's stick with the nautical theme (just a little longer) as we explore this idea (of compassionate community mindedness) this morning with a true story about my own American ancestors. In the year 1630, my -- now let me get this right -- my Great, Great, Great, Great, Great, Great, Great, Great Grandparents (impoverished Puritans by the name of John and Sarah Read)...and here is the genealogical chart to prove it [**SCOTT HOLDS UP HIS FAMILY'S GENEALOGICAL CHART FOR THE CONGREGATION TO SEE**]...here at the top are my ancestors John and Sarah...and here (at the bottom) I am listed with my three brothers...In any case in 1630 my Read ancestors (John and Sarah) were fleeing religious persecution in the British Isles, and were thus on one of the eleven fragile ships that made up John Winthrop's Great Fleet. The fleet arrived in Salem Harbor (with about 700 brave souls) on June 12, 1630, in a part of New England that would eventually become the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Before they went ashore to explore what would become their new home, the historical record reports that the eleven little boats were lashed together, and John Winthrop (who later became the first governor of the Commonwealth) delivered a now-famous sermon entitled "**A Model of Christian Charity**" from the pitching foredeck of his flagship **The Arbella**. That sermon -- which is often quoted in American political and social life (including, curiously enough, by President Ronald Reagan in his farewell address at the end of his Presidency) -- helped to shape the moral and social vision of the emerging nation. It gives me goose bumps to realize that my Read ancestors heard (and hopefully embraced) Winthrop's stirring vision for a shining "**City [set up] upon a hill,**" which is a biblical reference, actually, from the Book of Matthew: (Chapter 5, verse 14) where everyone would be knitted together in community, compassion and concern for one another. The "**City Upon a Hill**" would be a close and caring community where every citizens basic welfare would be of concern to the whole community. Listen to Winthrop's actual words as he dreamt of "**The New Jerusalem**" (the new "**City of God**") they would build together on the shores of Massachusetts:

We shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us...to provide for our prosperity [we must] follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our god. For this end, we must be knit together as one...We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities [which means to do without luxuries, without material excesses], for the supply of other's necessities...We must delight in each other; make other's conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community...as members of the same body...[If we establish this kind of community, Winthrop told my ancestors and the others] ***God will delight to dwell among us.***

This powerful-yet-simple statement was perhaps **the first American vision of community** -- the original Puritan dream for the ideal human community...a community which would be routinely marked by **compassion, caring and connection**. And those early Puritan settlers -- rugged individualists though they were in many ways -- did in fact (the historical record shows) share their meager resources (food, medicine, housing, and other basics) with one another (in those first difficult years when they were getting established in New England) so that no one in the community suffered or perished needlessly.

[PAUSE...]

So...dear Vero Beach friends...what do these two, curious, old, 17th Century stories -- the tale about my friend's Huguenot ancestors escaping from France in fragile boats across the English Channel...and the story of my Read ancestors hearing Winthrop's famous "**City Upon a Hill**" sermon the day before they went ashore -- what do these

two stories have to do with US, as we live here in America in these early (and relatively prosperous and safe) years 21st Century? Well, as I think must be terribly obvious to every last one of you, America (after all these generations) is still struggling with its national identity, soul and character. America is still struggling with what kind of nation and people are to be....and what kind of community (what kind of “social contract”) we are going to share (or not share!) with one another. America is still struggling to give shape to our shared destiny as a people. And (as a religious leader in this great country of ours...as a Unitarian Universalist leader, in particular) I think the great question before us is simply this: Are we (in the overview and at the heart of the matter) going to be a nation, a people, who routinely know how to **“take our turn in the channel”** so that all can survive and prosper? Are we to be a nation that looks anything remotely like that **“City Upon a Hill”** that caring community of people where every citizen understands him or herself bound up with the struggles and aspirations of every other citizen, most especially those who are impoverished, in danger, or in need? Or are we to be a nation of **ANOMIC, ISOLATED AND ANGRY INDIVIDUALISTS**...a nation of private and protected citizens where everyone must basically fend for him or herself? Which of these polar visions will primarily guide us into the American future?

This question has taken on clear and powerful poignancy over recent months as our government (and our political and social culture at large) have struggled (mightily...painfully...and in some cases angrily) with the question of whether or not we as a people should provide universal health care for every last man, woman and child in the nation. While there are **(and please, please hear this) significant nuances and complexities in the debate that we ignore at our intellectual peril**...nonetheless over recent months our nation has basically been gripped by a deep and painful polarization between:

- 1) those who believe that **“we the people”** must do whatever we can to ensure that all citizens have access to quality health care (that would be the “liberal” or “progressive” argument), and (on the other side)
- 2) those who believe we cannot afford (or should not provide) this level of protection and security for all (which would be the “conservative” or “Tea Party” perspective).

Now...please, please hear me. I am **NOT** here this morning in this pulpit to argue the particular merits of the particular health care reform legislation that was moved through the painfully-divided Congress last month – that is better left to the public policy experts and the economists over time. Please further hear that I certainly understand that not everyone in this room shares the same perspectives on this protracted public policy battle...including legitimate questions and concerns about the size and scope of our Federal government. Good and thoughtful people stand on both sides of the debate -- which, it appears, will continue to rage in “the public square” (and in the congress and the courts) for months and years to come. I am certain that Republican and Democratic (and independent!) leaders have valuable and useful ideas to offer as we proceed to give shape to this crucial aspect of American life... so I am not going to take partisan sides here.

But what I **am** here to affirm this morning (in this religious community where we regularly must grapple with the ethical and moral struggles of our time) is that I passionately believe that it is **GOOD AND RIGHT for Americans** (as John Winthrop first dreamed) for Americans to feel fundamentally connected to one another. It is **good and right for Americans** to be concerned about the many millions of their fellow citizens who find themselves without health

care. It is **good and right for Americans** to have a sense of community and caring that leads them to have practical (and political) compassion and concern for one another.

I don't know about you, but I have been deeply troubled (over recent months) deeply troubled by much of the tone and rhetoric of those Americans who self identify with the so-called **"Tea Party Movement"** (including the angry, conservative radio talk show hosts) as they have vociferously and vigorously decried and attacked all attempts at health care reform in this nation. Now in preparation for this sermon, I googled the **"Tea Party Movement"** here in Indian River County, and a lot popped up, so I know that thousands of people in this community identify with this movement. Your search committee warned me months ago that this is a conservative part of the country, and I certainly understand that I am not in fiercely liberal Washington DC anymore! Again, everyone has the right to express their beliefs and feelings on this important public policy matter, and I fully understand that health care is a very complex and personal aspect of American life with real financial and social costs. But from my perspective as a Unitarian Universalist **one sad (and I think morally dangerous) message** that has been repeatedly expressed by the **"Tea Partiers"** (and others) is **the flat out rejection of the noble idea that as Americans we have a fundamental connection to and responsibility for one another**. Led by the likes of Glen Beck, Rush Limbaugh, Cal Thomas and Bill O'Reilly, during this health care debate many Americans have been shouting at the top of their lungs:

"This is Socialism! How dare you even think of taxing me (even modestly) to provide health care for the poor?"

"This is Communism! How dare you suggest I have a financial and moral obligation to those in this country who do not now have health insurance?"

"This is tyranny! You have no right to tell me I must carry health insurance for the good of the whole population!"

"Don't Tread on Me! I have worked hard...achieved a comfortable life...and it's un-American to suggest that I need to contribute anything to the well being of those in our society who have not yet found similar success."

"Enough is Enough! I'm tired of coddling (through my tax dollars) those who chronically need society's help...I say let 'em sink or swim on their own...those people are not a part of my sphere of concern...they are wholly different from me...they're not like my family and friends...in large part they have brought their own problems on themselves...and I owe them nothing."

It troubles me deeply to hear Americans expressing such outrage...and such an angry denial of our moral responsibility to one another as citizens of this Republic.

And let me make one more crucial point here. People in today's Tea Party Movement like to think of themselves as following in the footsteps of the original patriots who tossed the British Tea into Boston harbor in 1773. But I would remind them that those original American patriots were **not** protesting TAXATION, they were protesting TAXATION **WITHOUT REPRESENTATION** – a crucial distinction. Those early Americans did **not** question the need for government to collect taxes for the protection of the "common good," they questioned the right of the British

government to tax them without the opportunity for citizen decision-making and discernment. But, contrary to that, what I largely hear in the public square today is many Americans “screaming bloody murder” about being taxed in the first place. What I largely hear in the public square today is many Americans questioning whether they have any responsibility for the care and protection of the most vulnerable of our citizens. I hear many Americans proclaiming that they have absolutely no responsibility to ever “take their turn in the channel,” that others might live.

And then – almost as a sidebar -- there is the name-calling...and unbelievably shameful racial and homophobic epithets that have been hurled (especially just before the final vote in the congress a couple of weeks ago) by some of the opponents of health care reform at those who support it. In a piece entitled *“The Politics of Meanness,”* New York Times Columnist Anna Quindlen decries what she sees as the prevailing *“Politics of Meanness,* [in America today] what she describes as *“The Cult of Otherness.”* Whether in American politics we are talking about health care, immigration or gay marriage, there is a tendency by many Americans these days to humanly distance themselves from other citizens. *“Otherness,”* Quindlen writes, *“posits that there are large groups of people with whom I have nothing in common, not even a discernable shared humanity. [In this system of thought] **Not only are these groups profoundly different from you, they are also, overtly, somehow less: less worthy, less moral, less good. This sense of otherness** [Quindlen writes] **is the single most pernicious force in American discourse [today].** [This] not-like-us ethos makes so much bigotry possible: racism, sexism, homophobia. It divides the country as surely as the Mason-Dixon line once did. At it makes for mean-spirited and punitive politics and social policy.”*

Friends...I believe America is now at a crucial crossroads...a moral crossroads (if you will) of both the heart and soul of the nation. There has always been, of course, a tension in this nation over the extent to which we are responsible for (and bound into) one another as citizens of a free land, and about the size and scope of government and its programs. Liberals have always urged a much greater sense of community and interconnectedness (and thus argued for a larger role for government in the life of the nation), while conservatives have emphasized individualism, freedom, capitalism and autonomy (and thus argued for a much more limited role for government). Laying on top of this long-standing tension (between liberals and conservatives) there has further always been a legitimate concern (and please hear this...a legitimate concern in a free-market capitalist economy like ours) about at what point increasing taxation and governmental spending (to provide services for poor and disadvantaged citizens) begins to choke free enterprise and entrepreneurial initiative. I appreciate these cross-currents and tensions.

But over recent months (tell me if I’m wrong here) over recent months the debate has taken an ugly turn, an ugly turn that may threaten the very future of our democratic republic, or at least the quality of life and conversation we all share as citizens in these 50 United States. And I further I believe that **this timeless American question** – this question of whether or not we should:

- 1) **purposefully and generously organize ourselves in compassionate and connected communities, or**
- 2) **live our lives in “splendid economic and social isolation” from one another –**

that this question **lies at the very heart and soul of our Unitarian Universalist movement.**

This may seem like a jarring or curious observation to some of you, but the fact is that, in many important ways, **our Unitarian Universalist heritage is deeply and passionately rooted in Puritanism!** Despite the undeniable fact that we significantly parted ways (during the 18th and 19th centuries) with much that defined Puritanism -- most especially that tradition's pessimistic assessment of human nature and potential -- in several key ways our liberal religious tradition never lost that Puritan vision (which Winthrop first articulated on that June morning in Salem harbor in 1630) of that ***"City Upon a Hill"*** where every citizen would be **held by the whole** in **charitable, compassionate, and caring connection.**

Earlier in our service this morning, I had us read responsively our seven Unitarian Universalist Principles...to remind you that at the very center and soul of our faith tradition is **a vision of caring connection and compassionate community**...with every member of the human family. Look again, if you will for just a moment, at our seven principles. **Every one of these statements – EVERY ONE OF THEM -- affirms the spiritual and ethical importance of human connection and interrelatedness.** Not one of these principles (not even "the free and responsible search for truth and meaning" which at first blush might seem somewhat individualistic) urges us into isolation or privatism. We are -- and always have been, to use the Huguenot imagery -- a faith tradition that understands and affirms the rightness of each of us ***"taking our turn in the channel."*** We are, and always have been, a faith tradition that dreams of us creating together a shining ***"City upon a Hill"*** where we keep ***"before our eyes our community as members of the same body...knit together as one."*** The whole history and spirit of our liberal religious tradition has been to teach ourselves (and then the wider world when we can) **AN ETHIC OF HUMAN INTERCONNECTEDNESS...AN ETHIC OF BELONGING.....AN ETHIC OF INCLUSION... AN ETHIC OF COMMUNITY MINDEDNESS. ..AN ETHIC OF CARE AND COMPASSION FOR EVERYONE IN THE HUMAN FAMILY.** This is especially true from the Universalist side of our UU tradition. As UU theologian Paul Rasor affirmed in the most recent issue of the *UU World*: ***"Universalism [is animated by] a radical egalitarianism. Universalism's core theological claim is that all humanity – indeed all of creation – is ultimately united in a common destiny...Universalist theology refused to divide the world into factions or to exclude anyone from its vision...Universalism 'encouraged the believer to think of his [or her] own interests as inseparably linked with the eternal welfare of the whole body of humanity."*** **"I am passionately persuaded that** (no matter where you might personally fall on the Democrat/Republican/Independent political spectrum) **to be a Unitarian Universalist is to know – deep to your heart – that you belong -- in caring connection and compassionate concern – with every man, woman and child on this planet.** To be a Unitarian Universalist is to know – deep to your heart -- that your fate and future is inextricably bound up with the whole of the human family. And to be a Unitarian Universalist in this culture means that you speak up (in your public and private life here in these United States) for a compassionate social order that provides **basic dignity and care and respect** for every citizen...every last man, woman and child...even if that means increased taxes! The debate over health care reform (and a whole host of other, related public policies which relate to how we are going to care for endangered and needy members of our society) will continue for all of us, in every region of this country. My prayer is as simple as it is heart-felt. As we engage the great issues of our day (and thus, as citizens, help to shape the spirit of this nation) may we always carry (at the very center of our hearts and consciousness) that vision of **our radical belonging to one another** which those 17th Century Huguenot sailors knew to their bones when they each ***"took their turn in the channel."*** May we never forget the vision that John Winthrop had of that shining ***"City upon the hill,"*** where every citizen's health and well-being mattered...mattered to the

whole community “as one body.” May we always carry at the very center of our hearts the great (yet profoundly simple) ethical vision which Universalist poet Carl Sandburg sang at the very end of his collected poems:

There is only **one horse** on the earth,

And his name is **All Horses**.

There is only **one bird** in the air,

And her name is **All Wings**.

There is only **one fish** in the sea,

And the fish’s name is **All Fins**.

There is only **one man** in the world,

And his name is **All Men**.

There is only **one woman** in the world,

And her name is **All Women**.

There is only **one child** in the world,

And that child’s name is **All Children**.

There is only **one Maker** in the world,

And that maker’s children cover the earth,

And they are called **All God’s children**.

AMEN.