

Thanking the Christian Coalition

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Like all good preachers, Muir begins with a story:

Beulah Murray was always a mystery to me. Usually, just when I thought I had her figured out, she would throw me a loop--and it always caught me by surprise, always. Beulah was a white-haired, 70 year-old, mild-mannered widow and beautician, and a member of the church I was serving. She had been a resident of the small town in Maine where we lived and a Unitarian Universalist forever. I buried her first husband, and when she married his twin brother, I performed their wedding.

It was Beulah who one coffee hour proudly told me that she had sent double her church pledge to the then forerunner of the Christian Coalition, Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. I was stunned and yes, try as I might, I couldn't refrain from wondering: Why? How could she? Had I done something so extreme that she felt that desperate? I was trying very hard not to take it personally.

The next day I had a visit with Beulah. And after she'd poured the coffee and we got through the chitchat, she knew what was on my mind. "I'm still a Unitarian," she explained, with apparently not a bit of misgiving, remorse or second thought.

"But how can you support Jerry Falwell **and** Unitarian Universalism?" I asked.

"You see," she explained, "this has always been my church -- and it always will be. But they ask and answer all the right questions. I may not like what they say, and I may not like what they do, but they're good for us. We need them: in fact, I sometimes wonder where we'd be without them. And besides, what they say makes sense and it sounds so good."

Muir was reminded of this conversation--one that took place around 1980--while reading a speech given by Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition. Reed and the Christian Coalition are the sequel to Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority. To listen to Reed, it's hard to imagine how anyone could find fault or disagreement. He defies the stereotype that we've grown up with, a stereotype that characterizes evangelical, fundamentalist Christian preachers in the screaming, sweating, Bible-beating tradition of a William Jennings Bryan or an Elmer Gantry or more recently Jimmy Swaggart. But Ralph Reed has a Ph.D. in history from Emory University and has moved on from the Christian Coalition to become a highly respected, and paid, conservative political consultant; Jerry Falwell, despite a serious case of foot-in-mouth disease, continues to court the rich and powerful.

Sure, the Bible thumpers are still there, but they're not the folks who've established a new institutional and conservative religious beachhead, they are not ones reaching out, raising money, and challenging in the courts. It's Ralph Reed and the Christian Coalition who have courted the Beulahs

of the world, who have spoken softly, carefully and with conviction about matters of home, heart, and health. It's the Christian Coalition who has challenged 30 years of liberal political and religious complacency, and so it's the Christian Coalition who we must be thanking for having sounded our wake-up call, who has disabled our snooze-alarm, and disturbed our slumbering spirits. Peter Gomes, minister at Harvard University's Memorial Church, puts it this way:

Strange as it may seem, I am grateful to the Christian Coalition and its predecessors for insisting that religious values, not just religious symbols be restored to the center of our cultural and political discourse. These religious groups have not only filled a values vacuum created by the self-indulgent and coarsening materialism of the last 30 years. They have also provided the political means for civic virtue to be debated along the wide spectrum of religious belief.

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They have asked all the right questions and the issues the Christian Coalition has raised are important—they're ones that go to the essence of our political, social and religious life. It's these life-meanings and purposes of the church that Beulah Murray wanted to hear about, yet her church--the church that Muir was ministering to--wouldn't address them. Virtually no one in Unitarian Universalism was addressing them at that time.

We need not be content with the answers given by the Christian Coalition, but it's quite likely that religious liberalism would have never gotten around to speaking about and addressing these values and issues without being forced to, without the incredible success of Christian fundamentalism. Muir suggests that we never would have addressed these concerns and over the decades the consequences of our silence would have been devastating.

He offers five areas where he believes we owe a gratitude of thanks to the Christian Coalition.

The first is basically the one that grabbed Beulah Murray--it's a matter of personal faith. Liberal religion has always tended to be pretty loose, open-ended, free thinking with few constraints. Isn't this precisely what brought many of us here--that we are a creedless and dogma-free religion? But being a religious liberal doesn't mean irresponsibility and spiritual freedom doesn't have to imply lack of clarity. Religious freethinking can mean embracing and articulating a strong, dynamic and deep faith. But for a long time, this isn't what Unitarian Universalism implied. And it's what pushed Beulah over the edge - it's what led her to send money to that address on the TV screen.

It's only been in the past 20 to 30 years that liberal religion has begun to grasp and understand the importance of personal belief and the vitality it brings to life--literally. A while back a study was reported that clearly showed people who go to church live longer. Wow! If that's not a powerful reason to get you out of bed and into church on Sunday mornings then nothing is! But if you think about it, there's nothing miraculous about these results. What the report suggested is this:

that the company we keep - that is, the importance of relationships and community as might be seen in a congregation - when combined with attitude, belief and perspective about living - what might be called faith - are critical to your well-being. Which is to say: having a personal faith and a group you share it with can make a difference.

Now this doesn't mean you have to know exactly what it is you believe--many of us don't. For some, our faith is "in the process of," that is, it's evolving. Yet for others, your beliefs haven't changed much in years, but you still are seeking new or different ways to affirm it, add to it, or maybe even to be challenged. And it's not just coincidence that the all time most popular adult enrichment curriculum in UU congregations is one called "Building Your Own Theology." It's an eight session class--that over the years has been expanded into three parts--that leads you through traditional theological concepts, insights and issues with the intention of each person coming to a better understanding of what it is they believe.

I think the popularity of classes like this one has taken on new or growing importance because of the visibility of the Christian Coalition's message which has in part confronted every person by their saying: "Here's what we believe." The implication for anyone listening then becomes: "What do you believe?"

In the process of answering that question, one of the stumbling blocks becomes language--how to enunciate your faith? What words do you use to describe your beliefs? What's made this more difficult is that religious fundamentalism, then the Christian Coalition, coopted the religious dictionary by cutting out all the words they wanted, assigning their definitions to these words, and then pasting them into a new dictionary and calling it the official one. And if that wasn't amazing enough, religious liberals went them one better: we didn't say a thing, in fact we were so caught up in the splendors of science, rationalism, humanism and the demystification of sacred scriptures that we practically helped them--that was language, those were words we simply had no more use for.

We have handicapped ourselves by giving away the dictionary. But just as every facet of life has its own vocabulary, so does faith. This isn't to say that the vocabulary of religious humanism isn't appropriate, but sometimes the language of humanism doesn't work. It's been said that religion and spirituality are poetry and song. In this sense, the scientific and rational language of humanism doesn't fit, it doesn't go far enough, and it isn't flexible. In the last several decades, the popularity of those like Joseph Campbell and Starhawk whose books and lectures on paganism, mythology and mysticism have gone a long way in helping us understand the metaphoric and symbolic value of religious story and language.

And second, when we don't use the language of faith, people outside this small circle of liberal religious followers have no idea what we're talking about. Muir tells the story of a class he took during his doctoral studies--a class in preaching (homiletics). One of the assigned books was a Protestant lectionary that detailed all the Bible readings for each Sunday of the year and included suggested sermon themes, liturgical garb, rituals, prayers, and on and on.

Well, for this Unitarian Universalist minister it was like reading a foreign script. There were words and concepts in that book I had never heard about. When my professor announced that not only would we use the lectionary as a reference tool, but the two times we preached to the class we were to base our one-hour service on the lectionary, I panicked. What was I going to do? What I did was call my professor. Certainly, I told myself, he can't expect me, a Unitarian Universalist, a non-Christian, to follow the Protestant lectionary. I explained my circumstances and concern. He listened; he didn't say a word. I told him it was like being a distant land and not knowing the language. Then, having essentially pleaded for his under-

standing, he uttered his only words to me, words that have echoed in my mind for 5 years now. He said: "So then Mr. Muir, I suggest that it's time you learn the language."

Muir says he wouldn't have come to this realization on his own and that we haven't come to understand the importance and value of faith language by ourselves. It took the Christian Coalition pounding away at us, defining and using words like sin, atonement and evil, prayer and blessing, grace, scripture and God, words that still have value, meaning and heritage in our tradition, in our lives, it took Christian fundamentalism to get us to notice that we were coming up short-handed.

A third reason that we owe the Christian Coalition some gratitude is because they have taken faith issues and language out of the box of privatism and gone public: they have challenged and dared every person of faith to make their religious beliefs central to their interactions. Peter Gomes talks about it this way:

The maintenance of what Stephen Carter has called a "culture of disbelief" has pushed religion to the margins, where it is tolerated only as a private enterprise, a hobby, an avocation. I discovered this for myself last summer when presiding at a naturalization ceremony that was part of the celebration of the 375th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth. There we were within eyesight of Plymouth Rock on a splendid Sunday afternoon, with Mr. Justice Souter about to swear in 102 new Americans - the same number as once arrived on the *Mayflower* a few hundred yards away. I was presiding, not as a clergyman but as the president of the Pilgrim Society, but the instructions given me from the federal district court in Boston included the unequivocal statement that there was to be no mention of God. In light of this stern inhibition, it was deliciously ironic to note that nearly every new citizen sworn in that day concluded his or her brief but heartfelt word of greeting to the large assembly with the words "God bless America," in more than a dozen accents.

This is not to suggest that we turn civic ceremonies into religious ones. Actually, Gomes isn't suggesting this either. What he is questioning is what role, if any, faith language has at public events. Sure, we've all attended public school graduations, award banquets and meetings and have heard clergy, coaches, teachers, and administrators use these as opportunities to witness their faith in Jesus Christ and we grow impatient and intolerant of their dogmatic displays. At the same time, I also wonder if too much protesting doesn't come back on us. Gomes notes: "Frustrations denied become the fuel of an embittered politics." And this often leads to hard and fast lines being drawn, lines that end up looking and feeling pretty silly and rigid years from now - like at the naturalization ceremony Gomes described.

So, while I don't necessarily agree with the Christian right's support of doctrinal faith language in the public arena, I thank the Coalition for raising the issue and getting us to notice our own parochial view, of making us take religious language in everyday experience as a serious matter. Maybe there is a place for faith language in our daily interactions as well as in more public spaces. Determining just what that place is has yet to be decided. But it wouldn't have happened without some prompting from our fundamentalist brothers and sisters.

We can also thank them for making us look at the way we "do" church. As conservative and fundamentalist Christianity has grown with numbers hard for us to fathom, they have forced us to ex-

amine our understanding of what it means to be a church: our programs, worship, how we welcome new people and care for our members, how we raise and use our resources - all the things that for years we took for granted have now been looked at again. When Charles Trueheart wrote about the explosion of megachurches in America - churches that count thousands at their Sunday services and give new meaning to the idea of a "full-service church," what he calls "The Next Church" - he concluded with these challenging insights:

Evangelicals are about the business of growing the flock, broadening God's market share, spawning new Christians and leading them to a mature faith and a life of service. The Next Church leaders and their congregations are willing to say so, and to act accordingly, in ways that would scare many of the people in my church out of their wits. For old-church people like me, the church provides safety from those who believe other than we do, and safety from pressure to act on our supposed convictions and faith by seeking out others to share them. A gated community, in other words. In familiar and safe surroundings, I understand, we take comfort and draw closer to God. **But might we be missing something - something as important as giving as good as we're getting?** (*Atlantic*, August, 1996)

"Might we be missing something" - I find those words haunting. I'm not suggesting that megachurch is the way to go. Can you imagine this group with even several hundred, not to mention a thousand or more members? But the dramatic rise of this very fundamentalist theology coupled with the overwhelmingly positive response of people of every sort to "Next Church" congregations makes you at least wonder not how they do it, but how and why we do it our way. Are we missing something? Are we giving as good as we're getting? I don't know if we'd even be asking these questions if it hadn't been for the emergence of the Christian Coalition and "The Next Church." Truthfully, I don't believe religious liberals would have taken a hard look at church-life without the high visibility of the Christian Right: they have prompted us to review centuries-old assumptions, listen to new voices, and rethink and renew our commitment to church.

We can thank the Christian Coalition because they've pushed us - in ways we might never have done on our own - to say what we believe, to understand and own the language of religion, to look at our use of faith language in daily, public interactions, to look at what it means to be and "do" church. Then there's a fifth reason for thanking the Christian Coalition and its supporters, which is really the sum of the other four: they have made us look at our future - what it will be and how we will get there. And so most boldly, they have forced us to examine a concept that has been as foreign to Unitarian Universalism as the lectionary was to Muir's ministry: we've had to look again at "evangelism", another of those religious words that we quit using a long time ago, a word that we gave away, that was taken over by Christian orthodoxy.

A colleague of Muir's writes that "Evangelism is sharing our dream with others in order to transform the world." (John Morgan in *Salted With Fire*) This isn't a sectarian or denominational idea - it appeals and applies to any person of faith. Defined like this, with the emphasis on sharing faith and not shoving dogma, the issues and questions then become: Do we have a dream worth sharing? Is it a dream with transformative power? If it isn't, then why are we here? And if it is, then why do we hold back from sharing it - why isn't it shared so it might transform lives?

Looked at in this way, the sharing of our dream - a form of Unitarian Universalist evangelism - takes on a feel far different from anything we have ever seen or felt.

The Christian Coalition and its fundamentalist supporters just assume that people want to hear and be a part of their transforming message and movement. It's in this light where religious liberals make a monumental blunder. UU minister, Tony Larsen pokes fun at himself with a very important message for us when he tells this story:

When I was young I went around the neighborhood spreading the fear of hell and the wrath of God; and boy, was I good at it. Sometimes I would walk around in my little priest outfit and sprinkle holy water here and there. And sometimes I would invite the other children to come to the church my dad built for me in the backyard, and I'd tell them all about the Catholic religion. If the children were Catholic but not going to church, I would remind them of the hellfire awaiting them if they should die. If they were Protestant, I'd tell them that being Protestant didn't automatically keep them out of heaven, but it sure made it difficult to get there. I was the kind of child that most UU parents try to protect their child from.

That's why we should teach our children how to defend their beliefs. If you don't prepare your kids in religion, there may be a little Tony Larsen in your neighborhood who will.

One of the liberal fallacies today is: "If I don't put any restrictive religion in my child's mind, he or she will grow up free." That's as illogical as saying, "If I don't teach my child about sex, he or she won't ever try anything."

Larsen concludes by telling us: "We don't get a choice about whether our kids learn about sex or religion. Our only choice is who they hear about it from first." (*Salted With Fire*)

What Tony is saying about religious education for our children is right on, but don't think for a moment that he's only talking about children because what he says has a lot of value for adults too. Adults too will hear about religion, about salvation and sin, grace and blessing, unitarianism and trinitarianism, evil and goodness. They can hear these messages as proclaimed by Christian fundamentalism and the Christian Coalition, or they can hear these messages from us. Which version will they get?

For a long time, because of our unwillingness to evangelize - that is to say, to share the transformative power and energy of our faith dreams - adults have been hearing a very lopsided perspective over radio and television, in the print media and from relatives and neighbors. The alarmist, divisive, exclusivist, punitive and oppressive dogmatic and creed-filled message of the Christian Coalition has been loud and strong. But we cannot let it rest there.

As we read together in the responsive reading, "In a world with so much uncertainty and despair, we need a religion that teaches our hearts to hope and our hands to serve." And in this sense, Unitarian Universalism has always been salted with the fire of helping hands and healing hearts. But for decades, it seems that, in the words from the Gospel of Mark, "the salt had lost its saltiness." Yet in response to the dramatic growth of religious fundamentalism and the birth of the Christian Coalition, there has been a taste for liberal religious passion and zest unlike anything I have ever

seen. "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another," it's written in Mark. So let us share the Good News of our faith, and as John Murray told his 18th century Calvinist neighbors, let us:

Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.

--The Reverend Fredric J. Muir, February 16, 1997