

## Unitarian Society of Hartford

Sunday July 13, 2008

### **The Right of Conscience and the Use of the Democratic Process in our Congregations and Society at Large: An Indigenous Perspective**

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As Unitarians, we are the beneficiaries of a philosophical legacy centered on the worth of the individual. This includes contemplation on the role of the individual in society, both at the Meeting House and at large. Our Fifth Principle is part of that legacy. **“We covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in our congregations and society at large.”**

To me, the Fifth Principle seems to me to be more political than spiritual. Why is this political principle part of our core beliefs as Unitarians? When I searched for commentary on this principle, Rev. Bridges of Rock Tavern, NY maintains, “Even though the Universalists viewed themselves as a denomination and had a creed, the individual was free to believe that which made sense to the person. This liberty clause served as a right of conscience.”<sup>1</sup> This liberty clause was part of the original declarations of faith of the Universalist Church following the Revolutionary War.

Regarding the second part of this principle, Rev. Earl K. Holt III, former minister of the Unitarian Church in St. Louis, MO has stated,

The political notion that people have a right to self-government grows out of a religious conviction that human beings have the capacity to shape their own destiny, that they are not mere puppets on a divine string.

Democracy, to put it another way, is more than a mechanism of governance. It is an expression of faith in the power of human

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<sup>1</sup> A Sermon by the Rev. James R. Bridges  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Rock Tavern, NY

beings to shape their own lives, a faith that is most explicit in the ideals of our religious tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Both Reverends Bridges and Holt view the philosophical origins of this principle and democracy as being based clearly in the Enlightenment. While the Enlightenment provided a cultural antecedent for the Europeans who came to America, is the Enlightenment the only source of democratic thinking? When I look back at early leaders in the formation of the republic, I can't ignore commentary by Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine that point to **other wellsprings for the source of democracy.**

Benjamin Franklin said...

It would be a very strange thing if Six Nations of Ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such an Union and be able to execute it in such a manner, as that it has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble, and yet a like union should be impracticable for ten or a dozen English colonies.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Jefferson was intrigued that America's indigenous people on the Eastern seaboard had not, in his words,

Submitted themselves to any laws, any coercive power and shadow of government. The only controls are their manners, and the moral sense of right and wrong. . . . An offence against these is punished by contempt, by exclusion from society, or, where the cause is serious, as that of murder, by the individuals whom it concerns.<sup>4</sup>

As observed by Thomas Paine,

To understand what the state of society ought to be, it is necessary to have some idea of the natural and primitive state of man; such as it is at this day among the Indians of North America. There is not, in that state,

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<sup>2</sup> "We Affirm and Promote The Right of Conscience and the Use of the Democratic Process Within our Congregations and in Society at Large," Earl K. Holt III, contained in With Purpose and Principle, Edward A. Frost, ed. Skinner House Books, 1998, p. 72

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Franklin to James Parker, 1751

<sup>4</sup> H. A. Washington, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: John C. Riker, 1854), Vol. 1, p. 444.

any of those spectacles of human misery which poverty and want present to our eyes in all the towns and streets of Europe.<sup>5</sup>

This retrospective view on the origins of democracy, and by implication some of our own deeply held beliefs may surprise most of you. After all, we live in a state that focuses on America's indigenous people when polemics regarding casinos or federal recognition of a tribe fill the newspapers or makes the evening news. However, for early New Englanders, serious engagement and understanding of their native neighbors was critical to their survival and ultimate political evolution and maturity.

The author of Forgotten Founders explained the colonist's need for knowledge of their native neighbors as follows:

At times, Indian peace was as important to the history of the continent as Indian war, and the mid-eighteenth century was such a time. Out of English efforts at alliance with the Iroquois came a need for treaty councils, which brought together leaders of both cultures. And from the earliest days of his professional life, Franklin was drawn to the diplomatic and ideological interchange of these councils -- first as a printer of their proceedings, then as a Colonial envoy, the beginning of one of the most distinguished diplomatic careers in American history. Out of these councils grew an early campaign by Franklin for Colonial union on a federal model, very similar to the Iroquois system.

Contact with Indians and their ways of ordering life left a definite imprint on Franklin and others who were seeking, during the pre-revolutionary period, alternatives to a European order against which revolution would be made. To Jefferson, as well as Franklin, the Indians had what the colonists wanted: societies free of oppression and class stratification. The Iroquois and other Indian nations fired the imaginations of the revolution's architects. As Henry Steele Commager has written, "America acted the Enlightenment as European radicals dreamed it. Extensive, intimate contact with Indian nations was a major reason for this difference."<sup>6</sup>

From my perspective, an additional ingredient that native societies contained that made their governing systems attractive to the colonists was the connection between power and morality. No, I am not talking about some type of moral majority definition of morality. Instead, I am talking about a moral understanding that we are responsible for one another and the earth on which we live and

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce E. Johansen, Forgotten Founders: Benjamin Franklin, the Iroquois and the Rationale for the American Revolution, Chapter 6, 1982

<sup>6</sup> Bruce E. Johansen, Forgotten Founders: Benjamin Franklin, the Iroquois and the Rationale for the American Revolution, 1982

should act accordingly. Regardless of our political or economic status, these rules bind us all. Frequently, the sachems, chiefs, or leaders were the poorest people of the tribe. Although they were leaders, they understood that their first responsibility was to care for the people, and that meant providing them with food, clothing, and shelter before they considered their own needs.

In addition to a lack of oppression and class stratification, Europeans observed tribes where open debate, disagreement, and women as political stakeholders were the norm. Although there may not have been voting booths, indigenous leaders clearly understood that the unhappiness of their citizens meant they would not be a leader for long.

When I cast my gaze backward, like Reverend Bridges, what I see is an American ideal and philosophy of individual liberty and commitment to democratic processes, but of very limited application in its early days within the American nation state. What I also see and believe is that the commitment to democratic processes and individual liberty is a work in progress. American political structure is not great because of what it is, **but because of what it has the potential to be.**

As a Lumbee, I also look back on my tribe's experience to sort out the concepts of right of conscience and democratic principles. Although some of my ancestors fought in both the French and Indian War and the American Revolution, those ideals that are reflected in our fifth principle did not extend to my ancestors in American society. However, they did practice these ideals within their own communities.

The societal rules governing many native societies are best summed up by something one of my elders told me. We survive and thrive as Native people by paying attention to the three "Rs". They are **Respect, Reciprocity, and Relationships**.<sup>7</sup> If we do these things in interacting with people, the natural world, and the spirit world, we will be in a right relationship that leads to contentment and real engagement.

I believe that these three R's are getting at the same thing as the democratic process. Because we respect one another as individuals, the individual has a right to have a voice and that voice can be translated into a vote. Because we have a right to a voice, we are involved with a community, which means we should have a relationship with that community. That relationship means that we treat others with respect and that we engage in reciprocity. We don't just take nourishment from the community - we give it back both physically and spiritually.

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<sup>7</sup> Conversation regarding the "Three R's of Indian Country" was from my cousin, Dr. Linda E. Oxendine. This conversation was a synopsis of a long discussion with another Native elder and academic, Professor Rosemary Ackley, from the Bad River Chippewa Tribe.

Lastly, individual rights emerge from the community. A weak community, government, or congregation cannot protect individual rights. Communities, governments, and congregations are weak without individuals contributing to them materially, physically, and spiritually. Most importantly for a tribe, it takes mutual support to survive long term. Individuals are simply not as effective or successful as communities for long term survival. Tribal people new this, and it was instinctual to try to maintain good relations so that the perpetuation of the tribe was ensured. Those tribes who no longer exist and were not destroyed by disease or warfare were those who were no longer able to function as a community. They were either, too few to engage in mutual support and reciprocity, or their spirit was broken and they were absorbed into the surrounding waves of colonization.

My mother and father tell me stories of the Lumbee community before the Second World War, and they are examples of a community that had a right relationship with its citizens. Both recount stories of people who where mentally challenged, impoverished, or suffering a tragedy that were viewed as important members of the community. They were persons worthy of respect, assistance, and love. And the community had expectations that these people would contribute their skills, resources, and spirit to the community. Those Lumbee who couldn't fully sustain themselves would come by a farmstead, shuck corn or help with farm work, and were welcome at the family table. Those who couldn't feed their children were brought food by those neighbors who had a little extra. Those who suffered the loss of a loved one or were injured had their physical and emotional wounds bound up, received assistance in getting in their crops, and were supported through the hard times. Lumbee people helped build one another's barns, houses, birth children, and tend to the sick using medicines gathered from the local pocosins and swamps. There was no such thing as a homeless person among the Lumbee until they moved into cities where they had no relatives.

My view of family is not unique among tribal people. A Cheyenne friend of mine told me about getting ready to go up for a fast at Bear Lodge in Wyoming, a sacred place for his people. While he was going to live up to his commitment and go on top of the mountain, he knew he would be a poor Cheyenne when he came down, as his band was hundreds of miles to the south in Oklahoma and no one would be there to welcome his return into the community. However, he had told one cousin of his from the northern band when he would be on Bear Lodge. She assembled many of his distant kin from the northern band, and when he came down, he had relatives to greet him, and he felt wealthy.

I view myself as wealthy because I have many relatives, not just in terms of close blood relations, although I have lots of those also, but in terms of an extended kinship network with which I share a common history and family traditions. None of us have a lot of money, but we have each other. Relationships going back generations bind us together.

My parents are taken care of in Lumbee country whether I am there or not because they are respected elders of the community. My relatives and neighbors look out for them because they are part of that reciprocal network. It is reciprocity that defines the relationship between my kin. It is also reciprocity and respect that drives non-relatives to assist my parents as they devoted years of their lives teaching in the Lumbee schools and ministering in the Lumbee churches.

**Today, in our congregation, are we rich or poor in terms of our relationships? Do we engage in reciprocity with our meetinghouse community, or look at it through the lens of a consumer culture, a commodity to use when desired and to ignore when not needed? Do we view one another as having value, respecting the individual rights of one another and expecting all to contribute by whichever means possible?**

From where I stand today as a twenty first century Unitarian, as part of “a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person” or standing below “one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father”, it is all holy. If I bring anything to you today through my stories, it is an exhortation to work harder to maintain our house, so that it can guard our individual rights. It is a reminder that our individual rights to participate in a democratic process grow out of a healthy community. It is a reminder that we are all branches of one mighty flowering tree. We are all relatives, and therefore are always rich if we treat one another this way. There is no need to be spiritually poor, or alone.

Whether we are participating in the democratic process in our congregation or larger society, or exercising our right to conscience, we need to remember that these rights and this process also come with responsibilities. With common origins of the best of European political philosophy and indigenous political practice, the democratic process and individual right to conscience is something both worth practicing and protecting. Responsibilities to love another, responsibilities to be our brother and sisters keeper, and responsibilities to respect each others right to conscience, even though it doesn't align with our own. Lastly, even though we disagree, our respect, our relationship, and our practice of reciprocity will bind us together as a healthy community.

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