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Liberalism and its discontents

by Leslie Kaye

Liberalism's lynchpin is individualism and individualism is the favourite attribute of Unitarians. Indeed, Unitarianism is probably the most individualistic of the individualistic Protestant sects. We reject any common formulation of belief, any creed, and our proudest boast is that we make up our own minds, each of us, about what we believe. We insist that the underpinning of our movement is the individual as ultimate arbiter of Truth with a capital T.

Ironically, this actually makes us very *mainstream* North Americans, as our broader culture comes out of the tradition of radical individualism, in both its religious and secular streams.

And this radical individualism, which may once have been necessary dissent against authoritarian governments, has now become narrowed and most strongly manifests itself in ever-expanding capitalist economic structures and the widening sway of the market. There, we stand not as citizens but as individual consumers. Our value is not inherent but is determined by what we buy. Our access to the goods and services of society is determined by wealth. Those who do not have wealth are disenfranchised because they cannot buy enough to show up on anybody's radar.

Let me explore the idea of individualism a bit.

Did you know the term "idiot" comes from the Greek *idiotes*, meaning "private person"? The most truly "individual" person is the psychopath. To them, all other people are irrelevant as people. They are merely instrumental objects to be used to satisfy the psychopath's needs. Hyper-individualistic free market capitalism serves to foster this pathology and declare it normative and even good.

Needless to say, materialistic liberalism does not bring out our best side. And our belief in the atomized individual, acting in his or her own interests, has lead modern society to fail to see how our actions, when viewed as a whole, have multiplier effects, often quite negative ones. Of course, viewing things as a whole is implicitly discouraged in a society that elevates individualism to the status of highest good.

Extreme individualism manifests itself as separation and isolation that far too often results in anomie, marginalisation and paralysis. Anomie, as defined by Emile Durkheim in his book *Suicide*, is "a state or condition of individuals or society characterized by a breakdown or absence of social norms and values, as in the case of uprooted people."

We are born through and in connection. In fact, the individuation process is accompanied by acute separation anxiety. Perhaps as children we are more aware of the unnaturalness of being isolated individuals than we are as adults. From biology we know that human beings exist only in relation. All people start out as part of a group—minimally, mother and child, but also part of a family, society and culture. And we are inherently part of and enmeshed in the biological processes by which the world operates. From environmentalism we know that throughout our

lifetimes we dissolve and resolve thousands of pounds of stuff just to go on being ourselves. Air, water, sunshine, food, minerals pass through us and are shared with the rest of the planet. The line between organic and inorganic is fuzzy. I have been working on saving an anaemic oak tree in the garden by feeding it aluminum sulphate and iron—two metals. Boundaries are illusory. There is no I outside of a larger we. Eventually we will have to admit that our cherished belief in individualism is based on a modern illusion.

I'm not saying we aren't individuals, I'm challenging an emphasis, an over-emphasis, in our faith and in our culture, that sees us *primarily* as individuals. I believe that the failure to recognize our interconnectedness is the major cause of our coming environmental and social crises. We miss the big picture impacts of the consequences of our individual and supposedly isolated acts. Or we minimize them: how much can my small action hurt? And if and when we do see the big picture, we easily succumb to defeatism, for again, how much can my small action help? Isolated, we are helpless. Anomy, alienation and isolation wear people down.

The risk is that when the crises come, we will turn to the Strong Leader to save us, since we're too weak to save ourselves. Indeed, noted economist Robert Heilbroner, surveying coming resource, environmental and economic crises, concluded we will *need* to concede power to strong leaders to survive what's coming. I don't want to believe that this is true. But are any of us sufficiently grounded in the reasons for our principles that we can explain why democracy, which we say we hold as a religious value, is going to be better than theocracy, oligarchy, aristocracy, dictatorship? How do we really know that democracy truly is the best way forward? Are we sufficiently grounded in the *practice* of democracy to stave off the future Heilbroner predicted?

It is the lack of *grounding* that I experience here that made me ask that we, as a congregation, see a professional minister not as a leader but as a teacher, a resource to help us go deeper into the underpinnings of Unitarian Universalism so that we can articulate clearly and with confidence why the answers to the coming crisis must be democratic and open, not a capitulation to the present supposed "experts" (who seem to always be tied to industrial-commercial interests) or to other economic powers-that-be.

We seem to be afraid to do theology here. One obvious reason may be because literally, theology means "god talk" from *theos* meaning god and *logos* meaning words or discourse. In a congregation where some people reject any concept of god, this sort of talk could cause discomfort, so we avoid it.

But theology, at least in UU circles, is broader, it's the examination of one's stance vis-à-vis the *big* questions. Theology concerns the underpinnings of one's ethical stance in the world.

So, how does a group of radical individuals actually do theology when all theology arises from one's history in a tradition, whether accepted or rejected? One's image of god, even if you don't believe in one, always echoes one's biography, built within a particular culture, time and space-bound. One does not build a theology in a cultural and psychological vacuum, so one should be aware that our theology may be more *reaction* than truth, a knee-jerk rejection of what one learned in the past rather than a synthesis of thought worked through genuine experience.

Why, for instance, do we believe that personal authority is any more valid than external authority? On what is it based, if we never actually discuss the issues deeply and authentically?

So, first, we have to decide that we will, or maybe must, do theology, to ground ourselves. And then we have to figure out how we will do this theology in the spirit of the Unitarian universalist movement.

When building our own theology, it has to be based on something *real*, by which I mean based on the teachings and musings of people who actually give the big questions real deliberation, arising out of the tradition of thought—theologians and philosophers and occasionally scientists. Which is not to say that we can't argue with their assumptions and conclusions. That is what the free search for truth and meaning has to entail. And then we have to test the validity of these ideas against our own experiences.

This practice might then give us a shared base from which to move forward, with enough depth that our views won't be overwhelmed by the powerful force of the market individualism of our culture.

We have to do it together. There is a common saying: together we stand, divided we fall. Well, as modern individuals, we are all divided, which makes us perfect targets of a purely materialistic society that sees all of us and everything else, including the planet, as objects, commodities to be bought, sold or discarded. And a perfect target of the tide of crises, catastrophes and fears, some contrived, that nature and the powers that be are throwing at us.

Robert Bellah, an American sociologist, in his address to the Unitarian Universalist Association general assembly in 1998, feared that UUs do not have the resources to resist being swept away in that tide. As he put it, "What economic individualism destroys and what our kind of religious liberalism cannot restore, is solidarity, a sense of being members of the same body."

Unitarian Universalism is in a difficult place. How can something so mainstream stand as critic over against a fallen culture when it is in fact so complicit with the culture? How can it model a modernism that isn't disintegrating and destructive when it is infected with the same cultural virus?

How do we, living inside a monolithic culture that is based on a completely false paradigm, an economics in which individual needs and wants drive an infinitely growing economy, imagine a new, sustainable future? How do we imagine sustainable communities? How do we imagine doing work that does not go on eating up the planet?

We can't do that if we are divided and distracted. Or afraid to face our fears. As Kath McIntyre says, "Unitarian Universalism is not for sissies."

I believe these issues are urgent. There is a war coming, a war over resources, probably over water, the basis of all life, as well as oil, as the natural environment becomes more unstable. Fundamentalist forces are gathering and wherever there is fundamentalism, there is a strong will to fascism. Broadly, the tolerant liberal values we espouse and that we tend to take for granted in

Canada are being eroded by radical individualism, pushing by a corporatist agenda of less government and everyone for him or herself.

There is a war coming and we need to be ready to stand against it. We have need clear ideas of what the future could and should look like and visions of what to do.

The world needs us to get this right. It needs what religion is best placed to provide, a voice for morality and the wellbeing of our neighbours, as a counter to our cultural norm of self-interest. It needs advocates for democracy, whose life together in lived democracy prepares them for participation in public life, which alone makes democracy function. We need to see democracy not only from our individual perspective as the best tool to allow *me* to be heard and instead see its creative function as the best tool to allow *us* to make good decisions, by involving us all.

And at the same time, we need to steep ourselves in our seventh principle—recognition that the primary fact of life is interdependence. We can grasp that, really *get it*. And so grounded, we can then, as liberal religious people, meet what I believe is our moral obligation to put our minds together and imagine a new future that we can model to a world that is undermining the very conditions that support life. For example:

- How do we combat poverty, which makes it impossible for people to make green choices in the present economic climate?
- How do we use psychology and sociology to get people to voluntarily reject the capitalist religion of “everything, all the time”?
- How do we redesign our cities, communities, houses, businesses, industrial spaces and churches to be sustainable?
- How do we renovate our old building stock to save the energy that is already encapsulated in that stock?
- How do we redesign public transportation to make it truly physically and psychologically accessible?
- How do we re-imagine entertainment to replace Roman-circus style distractions and energy-sucking activities such as ice hockey in summer or Nascar racing, to take two examples?
- How do we redesign our economic paradigm to make it humane, community-sustaining and based on a grasp of physical reality and its limits?.

Catholic theologian Karl Rahner pointed out that there is only collective, not individual, salvation. This is true even at the completely secular level. Physically, we cannot be “saved” by ourselves if our world is going to hell in a hand-basket all around us, as the present and coming crises in climate chaos are proving. This is also true at the psychic and moral levels. None of us can fight the coming battles alone. Only together can we be strong enough and smart enough and creative enough to figure out what we have to do next.

We must ask the big questions—the hard questions. We must figure out ways of getting the human race down to a reasonable, sustainable number. We must redesign our economic paradigm. We must figure out how to have an equitable and just steady-state economy at a much lower state than we have now. We must think in terms of real long-term solutions, that is, 10,000-year solutions.

How we get *there* will take enormous amounts of creativity.

But, most importantly, it will take a *co-operative* effort. A couple of million people in North America individually doing the right thing will *not* turn this train-wreck around. We have to act in concert, in the public realm, wrestling for the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens and for better decisions by our governments..

Our faith does have important resources: our commitment to democracy, the self-critical stance that is at the heart of liberalism and our seventh principle.

A liberal institution that can criticize *itself* as part of its free and responsible search for truth and meaning and has recognized its failings and weaknesses as well as its achievements and strengths, could be the locus of such an exercise in imagination. We could be the laboratory and testing ground of theories and designs of sustainability.

Through the Seventh Principle, Unitarian Universalist congregations “covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” This understanding came late, but I would claim that, to paraphrase the great rabbi Hillel, “*this* is the entire Torah, and all else is the commentary, which you should learn.”

As Unitarians, we must recognize that the seven principles are numbered backwards because they came out of the liberal tradition that got everything backwards, believing the individual came before the group and that the individual is superior to the group. Superiority and inferiority are category mistakes, like saying one side of your hand is better than the other.

Our philosophy must grow out of the knowledge that the community is primary and the individual-in-community must always be aware of and concerned with the on-going health of the community. And by community, I include not just people, but the animate and inanimate entities of the entire planet.

Surely the task of a people who covenant (that is enter into a formal, solemn, and binding agreement) and affirm “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” have to work to design ways to manifest that covenant in the world in every possible way. Apart, we have no idea what we have to do to secure the future of this planet, our home. Together, we can ask the hard questions and maybe begin to design real, sustainable answers.

A church’s job is to call us to be our best selves. And, because we are not truly separate from one another, we can only be our best selves in relation (that is, in service). If this “church,” based on radical individualism, only helps people to cocoon and does not call us out to meet our larger responsibilities in the world, then I believe it has no right to call itself a church. And I have no reason to be here.

We must come together in church not to hide from the world, but to gain the strength to stand in the world as prophets of a better tomorrow.

So be it.