

# *The Issues*

October 23, 2012

Some people follow politics the way other people follow sports. They read the Associated Press, Reuters, The New York Times, watch CNN and Fox News and MSNBC and talk about it with friends and family daily. They don't play the game, but they are dedicated fans.

Politics is a blood sport. It reminds me of rugby. Players leave the field beaten, bruised, bloody and looking to get out there again while the spectators cheer and cringe and wait in anticipation for whatever will happen next.

This Presidential election has gotten ugly, but not significantly uglier than campaigns in our recent past. In fact, American political campaigns – like the campaigns in other countries – have always been adversarial. Fear and anger have been standard tools, largely because they work. People are afraid and we are looking for someone to blame. We're good at fear. Fear gives us power, and inspires us to try to take power away from the other. Fear divides, weakens and then conquers us. It feeds on our frailty and envy and jealousy. It leads us to follow those who tell us we are victims. It closes hearts and poisons minds. And we are easily fear's victim when change is afoot. For instance, times in history when we've seen a large influx of immigrants, or a slow economy or war or the changing of social norms or the introduction of new technology, all of which we've been facing since the dawn of this new century.

In New York, we've been spared participation in the attack ad genre sweeping states like Ohio, Florida and Michigan. We haven't had to see our candidates for president, both good looking men, making unattractive, even mean, faces with fingers pointed and banners declaring things that are sometimes untrue, are often oversimplifications of complicated issues and are always unkind. Folks on either side watch those ads and get angry at the other side, adding fuel to fires already burning bright.

When campaigns get ugly, we blame "the other guy". We are only trying to set the record straight; the "other guy" is the one lying and spewing hate. We are playing the game they designed.

Campaigns are reflections of culture. This campaign is doing a very good job of holding up a mirror to ourselves. If the candidates are lying, it's because we want to be lied to. If they are aggressive, it's because we are responding to that. If they oversimplify, it's because we aren't paying attention.

I read an article in the New York Times this week about Vice Presidential candidate Paul Ryan. The journalist has been following his campaign and as part of the interview asked him why during the debate and a subsequent interview, he didn't answer the question that has been stalking him regarding the budget. The accusation has been that Congressman Ryan's numbers don't add up, that he's pitching a budget proposal that can't possibly work and to avoid that reality, he sidesteps the question. Mr. Ryan's response was that the answer to the question regarding the budget is complicated and not easily understood and that he would lose the audience; people would simply get bored and turn the channel. He said he avoids the question on television because it doesn't make for good TV.

Whether or not his numbers add up, I don't know. But, I have to agree that most folks are likely to turn the channel during an honest explanation of tax code proposals. In fact, that's the exact criticism Obama has been facing from his allies. He's too professorial. When he wanders off sound bites, he loses people, even his supporters. On Monday evening, I knew my husband had flipped to the debate from the baseball game he was watching because I heard the loud "Whoa!" when Obama delivered his "the 80's called; they want their foreign policy back" zinger. After that, the TV stayed on the debate, now deemed more entertaining than the pennant game. Romney was declared the winner of the 1<sup>st</sup> debate because he came out swinging while Obama was calm and studied. Obama was trying to explain complexity and the American public was bored, declaring that Romney appeared to be more presidential.

For the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> debates, Obama wore a new personae. Is this because Obama is really a person of quick wit and controlled aggression or is it because that's who we wanted him to be? He certainly got the response he wanted; Obama was the declared winner both times. We, as Americans, want our leaders to be smart and funny and immediately effective.

What's missing in our process is the opportunity for dialog. I turned on the 3<sup>rd</sup> debate, realizing I

already know all the answers to all the questions that would be asked and I already know who has my vote. Both parties have put their ideas out there as much as they are going to and a debate in which each person gets 2 minutes to speak isn't going to deepen my understanding of anything. But what a different process this entire campaign season could be if we approached it with the goal of problem solving rather than winning.

What if, rather than hammering home different sides, each candidate, sitting across from each other, laid out their plan and approached the alternative plan with humility and curiosity. Rather than the "I know I'm right and I know you're wrong" stance, what if it was more of a "gee, I wonder what the implications of that might be or if there's a way for us to combine my concerns with your ideas and find new ground."

We do it all the time on smaller scales, when far less is at stake. We find ways in our personal and professional lives to work closely with those who have competing visions so we can move forward in right relationship.

Our political process doesn't suggest that middle ground might be found. It's the pitting of opposing forces and one side will be declared victorious. Not even when the final vote is a statistical tie or when someone wins a popular vote but not the electoral college, do we expect collaboration. It's a winner-takes-all process.

But, governance doesn't work that way. Governance is about creativity and compromise and competing needs. I've seen it happen countless times when First Unitarian members who feel strongly about one thing are elected to the congregational board and discover that, regardless of how they feel, there are other ideas and alternatives and implications and consequences that have to be considered, and that's with about 150 stakeholders. On a national level, cooperation and concession are ever more important as our leaders consider the needs of 300 million people.

Besides, conflicts don't end when one side emerges the winner and the other the loser; they are sidestepped only to appear again at another time, sometimes with new faces. This is evidenced by the reproductive choice issues that are again making headlines as if this wasn't settled in 1938 and 65 and 72 and 73 and again and again and again. Because I am a strong defender of a woman's right to choose, I am guilty of wanting the other side to shut up. You lost. Be done. And Be Gone!

But the re-emergence of this issue, rather than being an opportunity for me to feel self-righteous, might be a chance for humility and curiosity. I was once the only pro-choice woman on a very conservative Benedictine campus, and my pro-choice stand was a secret. I was very young and it was my first full time job and I hadn't yet learned how to confront the risk of speaking truth to power. But rather than speaking one thing and believing another, I used the opportunity to be curious. My boss was a pro-life activist and ran one of the most popular clubs on campus. I attended meetings. I listened to what frightened and what empowered these young people. I read with them and prayed with them and I set aside my conviction, to live for a while in a learning space. And it changed me. I left that year with a much deeper sense of the complications of this issue and an impulse to stretch my own ideologies wider.

We don't afford our candidates the opportunity for humility or curiosity. We don't allow them to admit that they don't know or don't have an answer. To be "Presidential" means to be decisive, determined, authoritative.

As a result, this year our candidates are avoiding questions that don't have answers. It's been noted many times recently that climate change, the largest threat we are facing as a nation, hasn't been approached at all during any of 4 debates. Not a single question. While some in the media have been wondering why that might be, I think the reason is obvious. It's a terrifying subject. A majority of Americans don't understand the issue or are in denial. And the answers are wildly unpopular. The only way for us out of the mess we've made is to change our paradigm. It means infuriating energy companies that are funding campaigns. It means challenging the American people to let go of our definitions of success and progress. It means educating a population that has worked hard not to learn. I think the candidates are smart pretending this isn't an issue. Tackling it in an honest way would guarantee failure. Instead, they talk about energy self-sufficiency which is a pipe dream. We've passed peak oil. It doesn't matter where you get it from, it's a finite resource on its way to depletion. The conversation we're having is absurd, but it satisfies our need for concrete solutions we can understand in 2 minute sound bites. It won't solve our problem, but it will get someone elected.

The economy is equally complicated, but short term solutions are available. We campaign in 4 year

terms, so we need to see progress fast. Unfortunately, the best solutions rarely yield immediate results and it's difficult to sell the American public on a plan they can't measure instantaneously.

On most topics, we expect clear distinction between two parties and want to pick the one we think is right. But, there were moments during the foreign policy debate that made me wish for an alternative. On foreign policy, the candidates often seemed of one mind. I don't want to suggest that the alternative to direct attacks, conflict and contradiction is for everyone to agree on the path we take. It's competing visions that have the opportunity to bring us to new ways of knowing. The inability to imagine alternatives does not advance the human experiment.

One of the things I find most disturbing about this election season is the focus on the middle class and the rich. We seem to have forgotten about the poor. The poor might include the working poor, people who work one, two, sometimes three jobs but still can't pay rent or afford health care or nutritious food for their children. We've forgotten that our poverty rates are growing and the margins of this society are becoming fuller and our unwillingness to talk about it not only results in economic policies that don't serve the most vulnerable, but creates a culture of invisibility that hurts this nation at the center of who we are. So much talk about leveraging the wealthy or our governmental assets to boost the middle class as if the middle class should be our top priority.

I heard a wisdom tale yesterday. I'm not going to tell you the whole thing, but the gist was that a man found a coin that was worth a lot to him but he was moved to give it to someone who had less who was in turn moved to give it to someone who had even less who was moved to pass it to someone who had absolutely nothing. If American culture was informed by that story, we would be transformed. But, rather than wondering who has less than we, who needs more, who is most lost, we speak to the American impulse to get more. We haven't once approached this election through the lens of how we can give, how we can pull more people into the circle, how we can move our own wealth, tiny as it may be, to those with even less. Instead, our candidates are smartly pointing the finger at those who have more and promising they'll give us what they've got. That might be through taxes or job stimulus or building strong business or governmental programs- in other words, they don't agree on how they'll do it, but neither candidate has challenged the concept that they should do it.

We have a policy in this congregation that membership depends on an identifiable financial contribution. Generally, if someone really has no money, they can come to me and we can get that waived without much fanfare. But, it can happen, and it has happened, that someone could fall off our membership list because they haven't donated anything and haven't spoken with anyone about that. Because it happened recently, a situation we addressed and rectified immediately, a member privately offered to donate money to the congregation that could be used to cover anyone who has found themselves in financial crisis but wants to remain a member. The question this person has asked himself is "How can I use what I have to ensure that no one is pushed to the margins."

Imagine if our candidates were trying to ask that question? Imagine if the electorate wanted that question asked? (Remember, they are mirrors of our desire.)

"There's a noble tradition in the ministry, going back to the 17th Century. One or two Sundays before an election, almost every preacher in the land devoted his sermon to the body politic. It's a great literary genre. Often, the brimstone was so hot that an Election Day sermon was the one sermon a minister might be remembered by. There was a reason for that. No words were minced. He entered the pulpit and for the next two hours—count your blessings, folks—proclaimed a jeremiad. As in Jeremiah, the great Hebrew prophet.

Here's how it went. The world has gone, or is about to go to Hell. The reason is simple. God is punishing you for your sins. Whatever is wrong in this world is wrong because you are wrong-headed, wrong-hearted, inattentive to God's commandments, and God is watching and God is angry, and if you keep on messing up you will burn forever.

At least they burned for two long hours. Nonetheless, by the end of the pastor's jeremiad, almost everyone who listened did in fact feel at least partially responsible for everything that was going wrong in the world. No more "throw the bums out"; the bums were us."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is a direct quote. I am sure I took it from something Rev. Forrest Church wrote, but I can't find the original sermon anywhere. As soon as I do, I will post the reference here.

I'm obviously not of that particular tradition, but there's truth beneath the flailing and screaming. The bums are us. Our candidates aren't demonstrating humility and curiosity because we aren't calling them to it. They aren't asking the hard questions or grappling with complicated answers because they know we won't listen. We are dedicated fans, rooting for our side, sticking our tongues out across the field, hooting and cheering and waiting for blood.