

**What I've Learned about Liberal Religious
Values While Serving as an Elected
Representative in Kentucky**

**Rev. Kelly Flood
March 6, 2011**

Greeting Centering Kindling

Opening (*please rise*)

We are here

after days of gray and rain

to worship, that is, to sail not to drift,

to question not to deny,

to praise, not take for granted,

and to yield to the healing power of love,

rather than surrender to fear.

And so, we pledge to journey together along

the ways of truth and affection, as best as we can name them now, or may learn them in days to come; that we and our children may be fulfilled, and that we may speak to our world in words and lives of peace, justice and goodwill.

Sequence:

It makes no difference, ultimately,
whether one has roots in Zambia, or England,
or Japan, or in the Muskogee Nation...all are
mortal. All who are alive are just that, alive.
All share one earth not two.

It makes no difference, ultimately,
whether one has roots in a large family or
a small one, a loud family or a silent one,
a conservative church or a liberal synagogue,
a divisive clan or a cooperative clan...
we still have to make decisions in our life
based on principal, not reaction. We still have
to face dangers, and still not reject the gift of
joy. We still have to negotiate ambiguity.

It makes no difference, ultimately,
whether one feels first or thinks first,
whether one can leap across the facts and
intuit, or whether one goes through the
world meticulously. We are still each and
all called to share responsibility for the
common good. We are each called to
find ways to communicate even when its
difficult. We are each called to pay attention
to the silence that glues all of our words,
and all of the stars for that matter, into
one, astonishing and everlasting becoming...

silence

It makes no difference how different we are
when it comes to the reality of our communion,
each of us bound to the other in love, or by
worry, or by conflict or by memory.
Taking the particulars of our own lives
away from the universality of our ultimate
concern, we are free here to remember our
friends, loved ones, families, personal
mentors, children, ancestors, whose faces
rise before us at this time, and thank them

for helping us to be in this moment by
greeting them with their names...whispered
aloud or in the common silence....

naming

It makes no difference whether we sing
songs of one culture or another...for there
are no cultures exempt from the human
circle to which we all belong. Let us rejoice
that we are alive with song!

Readings:

The First Reading *is in two parts: both can be found on the back of this very Order of Celebration, this week and every week; the first set of words are a composite of written by several members of the congregation, including the ministers and the religious education directors over the last ten years. The second part is our own Mission Statement, created by ourselves over an entire year, with many voices combined into one statement of mission and*

purpose.

“Ours is a covenantal, not creedal tradition, open to everyone of good will, regardless of age, ability, gender, ethnicity, color, sexual or affectional orientation, or class. We agree to be together, not believe together.

Together, we mutually re-create this beloved community, as we work to practice our stated mission in our lives, community and the world:

We are here:

- To learn and practice true hospitality
- To revere the reasoning mind and the generous heart
- To claim our diversity as a source of our strength, and
- To relinquish the safety of our unexamined privilege for the freedom to engage in transforming justice

The Second Reading *comes from the book
Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now,
writings by Rebecca Parker, edited by Rob
Hardies, 2006*

“When I was a small child, I came home from
vacation Bible school one June singing:

Jesus loves me this I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong,
They are weak and he is strong.

My mother stopped my singing. I got the distinct
impression she would prefer that I never sing
that song again. When I became an adult, I asked
my mother – who is, after all, the daughter and
wife of Methodist ministers – what her objection
was. She said, “I didn’t think children should be
taught to believe something just because the
Bible said so. They should form their own
religious thoughts from their experiences.
Children shouldn’t be told that they are weak;
they need to discover their capacities and
strengths.”

Three Reading: *from “Don’t Think of an Elephant” by Berkeley author George Lakoff written in 2004.*

“The strict father model begins with a set of assumptions: the world is a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good.”

Sermon Rev. and Rep. (D) Kelly Flood

I’m Kelly Flood, a former community activist, UU parish minister, professional fundraiser for Starr King School, and a Democratic state rep from Lexington, KY.

Let me tell you a bit about myself first.

I was raised Roman Catholic, and discovered Unitarian Universalism in my mid-20's when I started to attend the congregation Mark used to serve in Hayward, CA.

I was looking for faith to affirm my feminist sensibilities and where women's leadership was encouraged. And, I was looking for a community where a multi-faith relationship with my husband, a Jewish man, would be respected.

I went to Starr King School, like Mark and Eric, and was ordained and called by the Lexington KY congregation.

After 7 years, I went on to serve as the Development person at our seminary in Berkeley CA, Starr King School for the Ministry.

Now, I'm an elected State representative in KY, a politician!

Let me illustrate the changes in my life this way.

When I was a parish minister, and I was out at a restaurant, a person would see me, buy me a drink, and then come and tell me the whole story of their life.

When I became a fundraiser, someone might buy me a drink, but when I told them I what I do for a living, they would just get up, go away and I would never see them again.

Now that I am a politician, folks see me in a restaurant, buy me a drink and then come up to me and say “You owe me something, now!”

Why be a politician when it’s often deemed demonic, at best, by discouraged modern men and women?

I do it because my public service is rooted in my liberal religious values.

Among those values that I cherish is a strong sense of stewardship – where generosity and strategic choices shape lives toward connecting, meaning and purpose

I'm here to advocate that stewardship for the larger good coupled, with perseverance and pragmatism –

I'd like to see this value held up, honored, and yes, *owned* by us

Why? Because our very way of life may depend upon it.

As you ask one another to commit your hard-earned dollars to fairly pay your ministers, fully fund your healing, transformative programs, carefully tend to your building and grounds, and meet your fair share of commitments to the larger UU world, and to the Columbus community, I want to encourage you to remember that how you understand this conversation of commitment, how you frame it, matters. Matters a lot.

How you frame things impacts our goals, plans, the way we act, and even the results of our actions.

How we frame things is often a form of what we understand as “common sense.”

How many here are members since 2000? (note: about a third raised their hands) Since 2005? (note: another third)

By coming here, by choosing this place, you have chosen a *liberal* religious worldview: humanists and heretics rejected the image of God – or the ultimate presence of Love – as a cruel father who demanded the suffering of his only son on the cross.

You are linked to Universalists like Hosea Ballou, who in his 18th century Treatise on Atonement, denounced that God – the great Jehovah – was his term – a God who would call for the endless misery of a whole portion of humankind just to appease his anger.

Ballou understood that how people imagine God, how they frame the image of the Holy, or if you will, frame what is of ultimate worth in life, influences the social structures we create, and how we ourselves behave.

The modern-day political scientist and linguist, George Lakoff, understands this too.

In a recent article in the New York Times he wrote: “The central issue in our political life is not being discussed. At stake is the moral basis of American democracy.”

And the central issue is how conservatives and liberals name or frame their worldview.

And no matter where you find yourself on the political spectrum, we are in the habit of framing our national discourse – just as we often do our religious discourse – in terms of *family*.

We speak of nations (and our congregations) as families first.

Why does this matter?

Because of the radical differences with which religious conservatives and religious liberals understand what a healthy, productive, prosperous family looks and acts like.

Let me explain; and please remember these generalizations, points on the continuum, not absolutes. Here I am using Lakoff:

“Conservatives believe in a strict father model of family where the father is The Decider, the ultimate moral authority in the family.

His authority must not be challenged. His job is to protect the family, to support the family (by winning competitions in the marketplace), and to teach his kids right from wrong by disciplining them physically when they do wrong. The use of force is necessary and required.

Only then will children develop the internal discipline to become moral beings. And only with such discipline will they be able to prosper.

And what of people who are not prosperous?

They don't have discipline, and without discipline they cannot be moral, so they deserve their poverty.”

The *good* people are hence the *prosperous* people.

Helping others takes away their discipline, and hence makes them both unable to prosper on their own and function morally.

An example of this from my home state of Kentucky.

There's a bill proposed by conservative Republican Rep. Lonnie Napier. The bill mandates that people on food stamps be tested for drugs before receiving the stamps.

This idea caught fire -- helping 'these people' who are defrauding good, taxpaying people by spending their money on drugs and getting by on food stamps, is a crime.

I pointed out on the floor that if we are actually that concerned about fraud, then we need to include the CEO's and board chairs of the corporations receiving millions in tax credits annually from our state government!

But in Rep. Napier's worldview, the market itself is seen as both natural (since it is assumed that people naturally seek their self-interest) and

moral (if everyone seeks their own profit, the profit of all will be maximized).

As Lakoff puts it: “the market has ...the ultimate moral authority, there should be no power higher than the market, and none that might go against market values.”

Thus the government can spend money to protect the market and promote market values, but should not rule over it either through (1) regulation, (2) taxation, (3) unions and worker rights, (4) environmental protection or food safety laws, and (5) tort cases.

Moreover, government should not do public service. The market has service industries for that.

Thus, it would be wrong for the government to provide health care, education, public broadcasting, public parks and so on.

No one should be paying for anyone else. It is individual responsibility in all arenas.

Taxation is thus seen as taking money away from those who have earned it and giving it to people who don't deserve it.”

Taxation cannot be seen – as liberally minded voters may claim – as providing the necessities of life for a civilized society, and for business to prosper.

Lakoff: “Freedom is defined as being your own strict father - with individual, not social, responsibilities, and without any government authority telling you what you can and cannot do.

To defend that freedom as an individual, you will, of course, need a gun.”

And then there’s the liberal religious set of values, found in the heart of the reading from Rebecca Parker.

Liberal religious values see our nation’s government as a nurturing parent who raises their children to not so much be obedient as open minded;

To think for one's self in order to become responsible to oneself and to one's community.

The nurturing-parent worldview assumes the world, despite its dangers and difficulties, is basically good, but that it can be made better; and that it's everyone's responsibility to work for the betterment of our world.

Thus, parents, whether mothers or fathers, are essential to raising children... children who know empathy (caring for how others feel) and responsibility (for oneself and others).

Remember the brouhaha when President Obama named “empathy” as an essential quality of a supreme court justice” The reaction by conservative pundits made it sound as if he'd suggested that “insanity” was the essential quality.

We are liberal religious people – we are the ones who deem what is holy in life to be grounded in love; we are the ones who value freely entered covenants over strict contracts and creeds; we are the one's who stress interdependent responsibility to one another over independent

self-reliance; we are the ones who deem the market as a means to the end, which is to build better communities and greater justice for all, especially the most vulnerable of us.

The role of government to liberal religious people is to provide an infrastructure of services that support empathy, responsibility, fairness, freedom, trust, transparency.

From these values, specific policies follow: social safety nets and government regulations to stem greed; universal education for all; protection of civil liberties for everyone and access to our court system for everyone, not matter their income; and the promotion of an economy that spreads profits and benefits throughout the workforce, ensuring all are enjoying an equal access to ‘the pursuit of happiness.’”

And taxes? They are the dues you pay to live in such a civilized society.

Why highlight these differences here on stewardship Sunday?

Not to favor one over the other, though I surely have a bias.

It's to help us understand that by showing up here on Sundays, you do have a stake in the outcome of liberal religious values in our larger world.

It isn't just about your personal quest for faith, peace of mind, rejuvenation of spirit, though surely that matters. Taking care of one's personal health and well being is a necessary and noble pursuit, indeed, but there's more than that involved in a congregation like this.

I want to emphasize that as a UU in a religiously conservative state like KY, I more fully understand why our churches matter. And matter a lot.

There is a battle of worldviews playing out in our country, where the most recent theatre is the good state of Wisconsin. There, tens of thousands citizens are defying the conservative

frames put forth by the Governor and are willing to flood the streets of their capital to stand up for what they understand: that democracy is about citizens uniting to take care of each other, about social responsibility as well as individual responsibility, and about work - not just for your own profit, but to help create a civilized society.

They appreciate their teachers, nurses, firemen, police and other public servants. They are flooding the streets to demand democracy rooted in liberal religious values: our values...the values of a democracy grounded in care for the stranger in our midst, the immigrant to our shores, of democracy rooted in social responsibility and in excellence, where prosperity is to be shared by those who work and those who serve.

Your church is making a difference in the everyday lives of each of you – the children in your midst, the citizens of Columbus who know this to be a place where people of many likes and differences gather to “learn and practice true hospitality, revere the reasoning mind and generous heart, claim diversity as a source of

strength, and relinquish the safety of our unexamined privilege for the freedom to engage in transforming justice.

In the days ahead, as you make your commitment to fund these values from your families' earnings, may you give more generously than you thought possible to pay for the people and programs that are here for you – and for Columbus and the larger world.

Let this place serve as a beacon of hope...hope for a congregation, community and country where empathy – citizens caring for one another – and personal and social responsibility-- shape how we govern ourselves.

And in the days ahead, as you benefit from the fruits of a successful canvass, may this congregation embrace righteous anger and courage, for what the ancient Christian theologian Augustine named as the two beautiful daughters of hope:

Righteous anger that things are the way they are.
Courage to make them the way they ought to be.

May it be so.

Offering

We who have been blest with this place
now may choose to bless it.

We who have been blest with our lives
now may choose to live with gratitude
for those lives by sharing the responsibility
for this our common house of spirit.

By electronic means of the modern era,
or by the ancient spiritual practice of the
offering, we give and bless.

Words of Commissioning of our Stewards

Will those among us who have trained to be
stewards during the following month please
come forward?

The word steward is a very old English word,
meaning the “keepers of the house.” Guardians
of the vision of this home for our spirit, a vision
of welcome and reason, a vision of dignity and
care, a vision of abundant, not stingy love.

These men and women will serve us all as we plan responsibly for the coming year, responsibly and also illumined by our vision of kind and powerful values in a world that is often unkind and distorts power. Rooted in a living tradition proclaiming Love for all, dignity for all, and access to all, these stewards will help organize our commitments of support in service of our mission and values.

Mindful both of what you can do and of your personal circumstances,
mindful that we freely agree to work together for the common good because our values ground and inform us;
mindful that both our hunger for justice and passion for truth meet in us to call us on our way,
will you join us in blessing these stewards as they do their work in the coming weeks?

Members or friends, will you bless them by responding to them with yourselves?

Will you bless them with clarity?
Will you bless them with kindness?
Will you bless them hospitality?
Will you bless them with honesty?
Will you bless them for the sake of our common
future which begins on this day? If so, please
praise this moment of yes with your applause.
And then let us sing 1028 in the Teal Books.