

Drumpffounded
Church, Politics, and Making Progress in Our Times
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
March 11, 2018

Shortly before the Presidential election of 2016, HBO comedian, John Oliver revealed that Donald Trump's family name had once been Drumpf, but was changed somewhere along the line by an ancestor. "It's the sound produced when a morbidly obese pigeon flies into the window of a foreclosed Old Navy. Drumpf!" Oliver joked. He had a lot of fun with the phonetically funny sounding name, and, given its kindship with a similar sounding word, it's a good one to help express how many of us are feeling these days, "Drumpffounded!"

It seems, since Trump took office, we've been pummeled almost daily with unbelievable, frightening, disheartening, drumpffounding news, like his appointment of a White Supremacist to head the Justice Department, banning transgender troops, firing the FBI Director investigating him, withdrawing the U.S. from the Paris Climate Treaty, dropping the biggest bomb since Hiroshima on Afghanistan, threatening nuclear war with North Korea, imposing travel bans on Muslims and other political refugees, ending DACA, taking healthcare away from millions, giving billions in tax breaks to the wealthiest Americans, praising and inviting murderous dictators to the White House while betraying our Nation's allies, an endless barrage of childish tweets, and the list goes on and on. If you're like me, you feel drumpffounded most of the time.

So, don't let my play on words mislead you into thinking I'm not serious about how, as religious liberals, Unitarian Universalists can take heart and move forward when faced with today's depressing and discouraging political realities. But I'm also happy to start with a little political satire, given that humor is one of the best ways of reducing anxiety and making our problems feel manageable. I know, in this age of Political Correctness, many frown upon laughing at the expense of others, or upon not taking serious matters seriously. But the very root of the word *human* is the same as the word *humor*. It's also the root of the word, *humus*, meaning, "earth." Humans are humorous. Life on Earth is humorous. And to be human, to be of the Earth, requires a good sense of humor, because we couldn't survive all its hardships and suffering without a good laugh now and then.

So, I'm being serious when I say humor is one of the valuable tools in our toolbox for coping our drumpffoundness. This is why political satirists like John Oliver, Bill Maher, Trevor Noah, Samantha Bee, Stephen Colbert, and, of course, the great Jon Stewart, God rest his soul, are so successful, because, through laughter, they help make some of our greatest concerns seem less overwhelming. In fact, the very word, "satire," comes from the Greek, *satyrs*, which refers to mythological figures that were publicly lude and indecent. In other words, satire is the original dirty joke, and the *satyrs* were those who brought up topics considered inappropriate, or politically incorrect, in polite society. Statues of some of these lude satyrs were used in Greek gardens like scarecrows, which is the entire point of humor according to psychotherapist Thomas Moore, to scare away "all kinds of winged spirits—our lofty

thoughts, our airy ideas, our flighty opinions, and our otherworldly aspirations.”¹ This is why inappropriate jokes often emerge in the wake of great tragedies, because they help make our loads feel lighter by making light of the things weighing most heavily upon us.

So, keep watching the *Daily Show*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, *Last Week with John Oliver*, or whichever political satirists tickle your fancy. Or check out the political cartoons in the paper. Or just take a break and go to a comedy club or watch one of your favorite comedies on TV. In theatrical tradition, Comedy and Tragedy are always linked together because we can't go through one without the other. So, find ways to laugh, depressurize, and lighten the load, with a little humor in these drumppfounding times.

It is equally as important, probably more so, to remain alert and resolute. If the election of Donald Trump was a wakeup call, then some of us must have been asleep at the wheel. In 2008, for instance, immediately following the historic election of President Obama, the GOP devised a plan, Project REDMAP, to elect key officials around the country in time for the 2010 census, when the U.S. Constitution allows States to redistrict their voting precincts. Within just a couple of years the GOP was able to quadruple its power to redistrict states, took over both Houses, and effectively blocked Obama from accomplishing much of anything for six years of his Presidency. Project REDMAP, which stands for Redistricting Majority Project, happened openly, right under our noses, and nobody made a move to stop it. This, in addition to voter suppression laws, mass voter purging, and a criminal justice system that disproportionately disenfranchises nonwhite, likely Democratic voters, were all accomplished with little notice or pushback, skewing election results in favor of a minority of voters. Democracy wasn't stolen, it was given away.

Maybe some felt, having successfully elected a Democrat to the Presidency, and our nation's first African American President, that we could take a break. We now know, unfortunately, that White Supremacy remains alive and well in our country. But why did it take a racist President, who has appointed notorious White Nationalists to his cabinet, or Nazis marching in our streets chanting, “Jews will not replace us,” whom Trump has called, “some very fine people,” for us to realize this? The reality is little has changed in our country since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, or the Fair Housing Act of 1968. As I've quoted before, according to sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, to this day, “blacks and most racial minorities lag behind whites in terms of income, wealth, occupational and health status, educational attainment, and other relevant social indicators.”² To better grasp the bottom-line of what this means, according to an article appearing just last month in *The State*, “The latest figures from the U.S. Census Bureau show the median net worth for an African American family is now \$9,000” and \$12,000 for a Latino family, compared to “\$132,000 for a white family.”³

The investigative report, entitled, “Kept Out: How Banks Block People of Color from Homeownership,” begins by acknowledging, “Fifty years after the federal Fair Housing Act

¹ Ibid., p. 120.

² Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Lynne Rienner Publisher, Boulder, CO, 2001, p. 1.

³ <http://www.thestate.com/news/business/article199674479.html#storylink=cpy>

banned racial discrimination in lending, African Americans and Latinos continue to be routinely denied conventional mortgage loans at rates far higher than their white counterparts.”⁴ Yet, during more than a year in office, Trump’s Justice Department hasn’t filed suit against a single lending institute for violating the Community Reinvestment Act, which, for more than 40 years, has legally required them “to solicit clients—borrowers and depositors—from all segments of their communities.”⁵

So, the real concern should be why many of us are only now, in the aftermath of Trump’s election, waking up to the reality of White Supremacy in our nation, when, again, so little has changed since before the 1960s. In fact, despite these ongoing inequities, during his entire eight years in office, Obama’s Justice Department sued only 9 lending institutions for violating Fair Housing laws. Here’s another example, in November the *New York Times* published an article entitled, “The Coast Guards’ ‘Floating Guantánamos,’” about how the U.S. is using ships floating in international waters to detain prisoners for long periods of time without due process of law. After the report, *Democracy Now* noted the extraterritorial confinement program was escalated under the watch of General John Kelly, whom, Amy Goodman pointed out, is Trump’s White House Chief of Staff. What she didn’t mention, however, is that Kelly did so between 2012 and 2016, during Obama’s Administration.

We should also keep in mind that the U.S. Supreme Court didn’t recognize the right of same sex marriage until 2015, near the end of Obama’s term in office, and that when Obama was running he expressed opposition to marriage equality. Also, it was only after much pressure from environmental activists that he finally decided to reject the Keystone pipeline, and he was mostly quiet about the Dakota Access pipeline until, with just 48 days left in office, he put a temporary hold on the project, effectively passing the buck for the next President, and we all know how that’s worked out. This isn’t about criticizing Obama. My point, rather, is those of us advocating for marriage equality, or other issues, like income equality and protecting the environment, have had to struggle just as hard with a Democrat in office as we must now do under Trump. So, when I’m asked what we do now, or what can we do, I say we keep doing what we’ve been doing for decades, working to make our world a more just and peaceful place for everyone.

As drumpffounded as we may feel, the issues before us today are the issues that were before us yesterday, and last year, and the many years and decades that came before. So, in addition to keeping a sense of humor, it may help to keep in mind things haven’t exactly been easy for liberals for a long time. We must keep our eyes on the prize, ending income inequality, dismantling ancient systems of White Supremacy, ridding the world of nuclear weapons, protecting the environment and reversing global warming, getting weapons of war off our streets and out of the hands of people who want to kill our children, gender equality and protecting women from sexual harassment and abuse, and so many other issues we’ve been dealing with for years.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

And this means, most importantly, in addition to keeping a sense of humor and remembering things have never exactly been easy for us, that we must still do something. We can't be left so drumpffounded that we are too depressed or despondent to keep up the good fight. We must remain engaged in the enduring work of justice making. And, as Unitarian Universalists, we must do so together. The question, then, is how do we best practice what we preach today? What can we do as Unitarian Universalists to make a difference now?

As part of a religious organization, there are certain rules of engagement we do need to consider, even though being a nonprofit 501c3 doesn't mean, as many think, we're not supposed to engage in politics at all. When I gave a version of this sermon in St. George, Utah a couple of weeks ago, for instance, a fellow showed up who nobody knew, didn't speak to anyone, had hostile body language, never looked up, and took notes the entire time I spoke. I presume that he presumed I couldn't talk politics in church and was there to catch me in the act, so he could report me to the Gestapo.

If he'd had just asked, I would have given him a copy of my entire transcript, in which I explained that, to maintain tax-exempt status, churches and other 501c3s aren't allowed to officially endorse or campaign on behalf of political candidates, and that's pretty much the only limitation we have. A religious organization can hold candidate forums to educate the community about the positions certain politicians hold, engage in get-out-the-vote drives, and spend a non-substantial amount of its budget on lobbying efforts—up to a million dollars if large enough—so long as it does all these things in a nonpartisan fashion. We're also perfectly free to publicly advocate for the issues, including initiatives and referendums, we support, just as we did when we paid for marriage equality billboards in 2012 directly stating, "Vote Yes on Ref. 74."

So, outside of telling people *who* they should vote for, don't let anyone tell you that as Unitarian Universalists we can't engage in politics. The question is, should we? Is it ethical for us to do so? According to the latest pew research, a growing number of people consider themselves "spiritual but not religious," and are turned off by organized religion because, they say, churches are "too involved in politics."⁶ Most of these, however, still identify as Christians, but simply don't go to church anywhere. In other words, what most mean by "spiritual but not religious," is "Christian but not churchgoing."

While I certainly understand why so many are turned off by the comingling of religion and politics these days, I personally don't know how to be religious without being political. I'm not turned off by religion and politics; I'm turned off by religions engaged in the wrong politics, in the politics of inequality, the politics of discrimination, and the politics of exploitation. Using religion as an excuse to justify mistreating and oppressing others ought to trouble us all. But using religion as a political force to liberate the oppressed and make the world a more just and peaceful place for all beings is, to me, it's very purpose.

For what is the point of religion if it's not making justice, creating heaven on Earth, and being the change we wish to see? This is why the words *politics* and *liturgy* share the same root.

⁶ <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise-religion/>

Politics means “the will of the people,” and *liturgy* means “the work of the people.” One must follow the other. It isn’t enough to merely want transformation, we must work for it. “Faith without works is dead.” Faith without action is pointless. And faith that’s used to justify injustice isn’t faith at all.

Karen Armstrong, the renowned authority on world religion, says that all the major religions on Earth today began in response to injustice. “What mattered,” in the beginning, she says, “was not what you believed, but how you behaved.”⁷ This is why the Hebrew book of *Amos* says, “I hate and reject your festivals; and your religious ceremonies stink! I cannot accept your burnt offerings and refuse to look at your animal sacrifices. I can’t stand that noise you call singing and music. Instead of all that, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”⁸ It’s why *Isaiah* says the entire purpose of religion is to, “bring relief to the poor, to heal the downtrodden, to proclaim liberty to the oppressed, and to set the captives free.”⁹ Likewise, as some Christian scholars now recognize, Jesus’ parables are not merely, “earthly stories with heavenly meanings.”¹⁰ Rather, as William Herzog says in his book, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, “...Jesus’ ministry was concerned with political and economic issues. Matters of justice were not peripheral to a spiritual gospel but were at the heart of his proclamation and practice.”¹¹ Or, as theologian Walter Wink more succinctly says, “Almost every sentence Jesus uttered was an indictment of the Domination System or the disclosure of an alternative to it.”¹²

Indeed, some of the most admired social reformers in modern history have been religious leaders who engaged in politics. Mahatma Gandhi was a devout Hindu and the spiritual leader of an ashram. Martin Luther King Jr., was a Baptist minister. Susan B. Anthony, an abolitionist and leader in the women’s suffrage movement, was inspired by her Quaker religion. Daniel and Philip Berrigan, who were on the FBI’s most wanted list for burning Vietnam draft notices with napalm, were both Catholic Priests; as was Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated in 1980 for speaking against government oppression and death squads in San Salvador. The world-renowned peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh is a Buddhist priest, and the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet, is one of today’s leading human rights activists.

So, as Unitarian Universalists, we can and *should* remain politically active in our communities and our world. As a UU minister, I’ve been politically engaged for years, and, though the “men in black” have come around a couple of times, so far, they’ve not threatened or questioned the 501c3 status of the churches I’ve pastored, not that this should be our primary concern. After the 2004 national election, as many of you know, Kentucky, where I was living at the time, was among the first of eleven states to pass constitutional amendments officially banning same sex marriage. The following Sunday, I told my congregation that I could no

⁷ Armstrong, Karen, *The Great Transformation*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 2006, p. xiii.

⁸ Amos 5:21-24

⁹ Isaiah 61:1

¹⁰ Herzog, William R., *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1994, p. 9.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 264.

¹² Wink, Walter, *The Powers that Be*, A Galilee Book published by Doubleday, New York, NY, 1998, p. 64.

longer, in good conscience, perform weddings for anyone until I'm free to perform them for all couples, including gays and lesbians. Although the good folks at the Clifton Unitarian Church in Louisville applauded and supported my decision, my secular employers reprimanded and demoted me, then asked for my resignation. I was fired a few weeks later. Even so, I didn't perform a wedding ceremony for almost a decade, not until 2012, when it became legal for me to do so here in Washington.

Since January 2017, furthermore, I have addressed, what I consider, the ill-gotten election of Donald Trump in nearly half my sermons, including this morning's. In 2017 I also filed the initiative in Spokane that, if passed, would have fined oil and coal companies for unsafely transporting fossil fuels through Spokane. Unfortunately, as you know, the railroad outspent our grassroots campaign an estimated half million to our six-grand, and we lost by 9 percentage points. Just a few weeks ago, however, Washington's Governor Inslee rejected the last of six permit requests to construct a fossil fuel export facility on our coastline, partly out of concern for the safety of Spokane, he said, reciting the very talking points expressed in our initiative word for word. Even though we lost locally, our work ended up being the cover our Governor needed to give us a statewide victory by saying "no" to the deadly and dying fossil fuel industry. I also often hold fundraisers for political candidates in my home, and I've engaged in all these activities, and more, not because I'm overly political, but, again, because I'm deeply religious, because I am a Unitarian Universalist, and I don't know how to be religious without also being political. Liturgics without politics is dead.

Like many of you, I'm guessing, I feel drumpffounded most the time nowadays, but I counter my confusion and despondency by keeping my sense of humor, remembering things have never been easy for religious liberals, and by remaining active in the work of social and environmental justice. The long arc of the Universe may bend toward justice, but I'm quite sure it won't get there without us, that even if some of us never make it there ourselves, no one will reach the Promised Land without our help.