

Take Back America?

A Sermon Delivered on May 23, 2010
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“Sitting at the table doesn’t make you a diner,
unless you eat some of what’s on that plate.
Being here in America doesn’t make you an American.”
-- Malcolm X*

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Meditation: by Joy Harjo, a member of the Native-American Muscogee (or Creek) Nation, a piece entitled “Eagle Poem”

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you.
And know there is more
That you can't see, can't hear
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon, within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.

Reading: by Dick Morris and Eileen McGann from *2010 Take Back America - A Battle Plan* (from the dust jacket)

We stand at the crossroads of ideals and policies: freedom vs. socialism; sovereignty versus international subservience; economic liberty versus dept slavery; quality medical care versus government-sponsored euthanasia...

All of this depends on the answer to one question: Will Obama maintain his control of Congress...

Morris and McGann explain the stakes - permanent unemployment, rampaging inflation, international control of our economy, collapse of our manufacturing industry, European-style taxation levels...

They point out the targets... They outline a strategy for victory... And then they tell us what we can do as individuals to defeat Obama... The battle is coming. *2010: Take Back America* is the basic training manual you will need to win.

Reading: by Howard Dean from *You Have the Power: How to Take Back our Country and Restore Democracy in America* (p. 1)

“I WANT MY COUNTRY BACK!”

The words just rose from my gut. And when they hit the room on that sunny March day in 2003, everything seemed to stop. The California Democrats [at the National Convention], who only minutes earlier had been milling around, talking among themselves, and half listening as presidential candidate after candidate had made a play for their attention, paused.

“*WE WANT OUR COUNTRY BACK!*”

“*I don’t want to be divided anymore,*” I said.

“*I don’t want to listen to the fundamentalist preachers anymore.*”

“*I want America to look like America.*”

People were weeping quietly. Some were openly sobbing. Others were screaming. Standing on their chairs and stamping their feet....

What had happened in that room had very little to do with me. I’d been the catalyst for an eruption of feeling that was much deeper, more powerful, and, I would learn, more widespread than anything I’d ever imagined.

It was a low-burning fire of resentment and rage. All it needed was a simple spark in order to explode.

Reading: by Audre Lorde, who described herself as a "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet." From a poem entitled “A Litany for Survival”

For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice...

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid

it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak
we are afraid our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive

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I don't know if you heard, earlier this month the board of trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association called a special meeting to discuss an illegal immigration law just recently adopted in Arizona.

The law empowers police officers in Arizona to arrest people they think might be in the country illegally. It is the broadest and strictest immigration measure adopted in generations. It makes it a crime to walk along the street without immigration documents in your pocket, that prove you are either an American citizen or a legal immigrant, resident or visitor. The law is an effort to address a rising concern in Arizona, about the number of people illegally entering their state from Mexico. But, in effect, it puts anyone who appears Hispanic to police officers, at risk of being stopped and detained. The implications are frightening.

The President of UUA, the Reverend Peter Morales, is Latino. In a press release he wrote,

“Arizona’s Senate Bill 1070 undermines everything our nation stands for. Under the provisions of this law, members of my own extended family could be targeted and detained, even though we have been American citizens for generations. Thousands of peaceful, law-abiding residents will be subject to the most invasive and discriminatory abuses of state power.

Everything I hold sacred as an American and as a person of faith is repulsed by this legislation. We cannot stand by while those charged to protect us instead subject us to racial profiling, unwarranted searches, and unjust arrests. We must not let fear and ignorance cause our neighbors to be treated as lesser beings...”

In response to the new law, the board of trustees proposes a boycott. Phoenix, Arizona, is the planned location of the 2012 General Assembly. (General Assembly is a meeting of thousands of delegates from UU congregations across the country, which takes place in different location every year. Next month, along with several delegates from this church, I will be attending this year’s GA in Minneapolis, MN.) The board proposes that the General Assembly be moved to another state next year. Canceling commitments already made with hotels and convention center may cost us well over \$600,000. This is a price the board feels we should certainly pay, for the sake of our moral convictions. At next month’s General Assembly delegates will vote on whether to follow the board’s recommendation.

* * *

Peter Morales says, Arizona’s law flies in the face of everything he holds sacred as a person of faith and as an American. And it’s true. The law does touch a nerve. It touches our deepest convictions about what this country stands for and what it means to be American.

A few weeks ago the New York Times columnist Frank Rich made the case that the new law is about much more than Arizona. In a piece entitled “If Only Arizona Were the Real Problem,” he writes,

“The law dovetails seamlessly with the national “Take Back America” crusade that has attended the rise of Barack Obama and the accelerating demographic shift our first African-American president represents.

The crowd that wants Latinos to show their papers if there’s a “reasonable suspicion” of illegality is often the same crowd still demanding that the president produce a document proving his own citizenship. Lest there be any doubt of that confluence, Rush Limbaugh hammered the point home after Obama criticized Arizona’s action. “I can understand Obama being touchy on the subject of producing your papers,” he said. “Maybe he’s afraid somebody’s going to ask him for his.” Or, as Glenn Beck chimed in about the president last week: “What has he said that sounds like American?” (*The New York Times*, May 2, 2010)

* * *

Take Back America. That’s the slogan Dick Morris and Eileen McGann use to encapsulate their efforts to unseat the current administration in the White House. It is a slogan shared by members of the Tea Party Movement, who see today’s government as a threat to their personal liberties - the freedoms they see at the very heart of what it means to be American.

Take Back America, is a catchy and compelling phrase. When I hear it invoked by those who don't share my political beliefs, a cynical voice in my head wants to ask, What is this America you want to take back? What does it look like? Who is included and who isn't?

Tea Party supporters are better educated and wealthier than the general public, and overwhelmingly white. Is that the kind of America they envision? A nation of wealthy white people, in which other ethnicities and poor people are grudgingly tolerated at the fringes of society.

The Tea Party Movement takes its name from the Boston Tea Party of 1773, when colonists protested British taxation by dumping a shipment of tea into the Boston Harbor. No taxation without representation, was the idea. And this idea eventually led to the American Revolutionary War two years later.

Thinking about these early expressions of American patriotism, I can't help but wonder what it says about American identity that the Tea Party itself was carried out by British colonists dressed up as Mohawk Indians.

As our history books tell us, "On the night of December 16, 1773, a group of about 60 men, encouraged by a large crowd of Bostonians, donned blankets and Indian headdresses, marched to Griffin's wharf, boarded the ships, and dumped the tea chests, valued at £18,000, into the water." (Encyclopedia Britannica)

The historian Philip Deloria describes the event as street theater linked with civil disobedience. "No one tried to stop the tea party, least of all the crowd of spectators gathered on the well-lit wharf. When they had finished, the raiders cleaned up the ships, apologized to the guards for a broken lock, and went home to wash off their war paint." (*Playing Indian*, p. 2)

At the time, the colonists were trying to define an American identity distinct from their British origins. The image of the noble savage served that purpose. Even though for the following centuries the colonists and their descendents waged an unrelenting campaign to drive real Native Americans from the land, and claim it as their own.

When I hear members of today's Tea Party call us to take back America, I can't help but be reminded of this history, and the question, Who truly owns America? And who should be taking it back?

But the truth is, even though those who want to take back America are on one end of the political spectrum today, the slogan has been embraced by those on the opposite side of the spectrum, too. Just a few years ago, Howard Dean was able to work the delegates at the Democratic National Convention into a frenzy, with his impassioned cry, "I want my country back." Howard Dean says, he wants America to look like America.

What does America look like? What should America look like?

* * *

America is changing. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 40 years from now European Americans will no longer constitute the majority of the U.S. population. The percentage of whites will decline, while Asians and Hispanics will increase. The fastest growing group is made up of people who identify as multiracial.

Rising immigration is a major factor in our shifting demographics. The last time immigration peaked was in the early 1900s. At that time 95 percent of immigrants were from Europe. Today Europeans account for only one eighth of immigrants. Half are from Latin America. A quarter are from Asia and the Middle East.

Even though cultural diversity is increasing in this country as whole, over the past decade, culturally speaking, Unitarian Universalists have remained basically unchanged. In 2007 UUs were 89 percent white, 3 percent Asian, 3 percent Hispanic, 1 percent African American. Despite our avowed interest in diversity and inclusivity, we still are better educated and wealthier than the general public, and overwhelmingly white.

The UU theologian Paul Razor points out that though we affirm theological and cultural diversity, this affirmation is largely an intellectual position rather than a concrete reality. He says, we tend “to keep our religious commitments largely in our heads, where we can hold them at a comfortable arm’s length. This gives us a sense of control; it allows us to feel spiritually safe.”

But real multiculturalism threatens this sense of safety. Razor says, for Unitarian Universalists, “multiculturalism represents a form of danger.” This sense of danger has little to do with demographics, but points to a deeper fear. On one level it is a fear of change and difference. But on a deeper level, it is a fear of losing control.

Our effort to become a truly multiracial and multicultural faith, “challenges our safe and tidy way of being religious. In this sense, multiculturalism [represents]... a threat not simply to our illusion of control, but to our very identity.”

* * *

We are afraid. All of us are afraid. Whether American or Mexican. Whether citizen or immigrant. Whether legal or illegal. Whether liberal or conservative. Whether white or black or red or brown. Whether our stomachs are full or our stomachs are empty.

We are all afraid, each in our own way. And yet our fear need not divide us.

Paul Razor reminds us, our Universalist heritage itself was a direct response to a theology of fear that once dominated the churches in this country. Universalism challenged the once wide-spread idea that most of humanity would be victim to God’s unforgiving judgment, and only the “elect” would be saved from eternal hellfire. Universalists

ferently believed all would be saved. They “refused to divide the world into factions or exclude anyone from [their] vision.” They said, we’re all in this together, and wherever we are headed, we share the same destiny. They insisted that our individual salvation is no more important than anyone else’s salvation.

Razor writes,

“Early Universalists understood that liberation is communal, that human fulfillment and liberation are possible only in a context of open and inclusive communities based on respect and justice. Liberal theology today, like early Universalist theology, recognizes that spiritual liberation and social liberation are inextricably linked... Our shifting cultural context is both a challenge and an invitation to reclaim this vision and make it a reality in our time.” (*UU World*, Spring 2010)

We are all afraid. When the sun rises, we are afraid it might not remain. When the sun sets, we are afraid it might not rise in the morning. When we are loved, we are afraid love will vanish. When we are alone, we are afraid love will never return.

We must acknowledge our fear, if we seek to move beyond it. Fear wants to divide us, silence us, shut us down. Knowing this, we can choose a different path.

We can choose to open our whole self to sky, to earth, to sun to moon, and know there is more that we can’t see, can’t hear, except in moments steadily growing. We can take care and kindness in all things, and know we are truly blessed. We can see that we live in beauty, beauty around us, and beauty within every one of us.

May we move from a fear that divides, toward a faith that unites us with all people.
May we see that we live within an inescapable network of mutuality,
tied in a single colorful garment of destiny.
And may we do our part to create a country
in which the American dream of peace and justice
is a reality for all.

Amen.