

Reading #1

**Excerpted from
Prospects for Conservatives
By Russell Kirk**

At the back of every discussion of the good society lies this question, What is the object of human life? The enlightened conservative does not believe that the end or aim of life is competition; or success; or enjoyment; or longevity; or power; or possessions. He believes, instead, that the object of life is Love. He knows that the just and ordered society is that in which Love governs us, so far as Love ever can reign in this world of sorrows; and he knows that the anarchical or the tyrannical society is that in which Love lies corrupt. He has learnt that Love is the source of all being, and that Hell itself is ordained by Love. He understands that Death, when we have finished the part that was assigned to us, is the reward of Love. And he apprehends the truth that the greatest happiness ever granted to a man is the privilege of being happy in the hour of his death.—

Reading #2

**A Lecture delivered by Ralph Waldo Emerson
at the Masonic Temple, Boston,
December 9, 1841**

The two parties which divide the state, the party of Conservatism and that of Innovation, are very old, and have disputed the possession of the world ever since it was made. This quarrel is the subject of civil history. The conservative party established the reverend hierarchies and monarchies of the most ancient world. The battle of patrician and plebeian, of parent state and colony, of old usage and accommodation to new facts, of the rich and the poor, reappears in all countries and times. The war rages not only in battle-fields, in national councils, and ecclesiastical synods, but agitates every man's bosom with opposing advantages every hour. On rolls the old world meantime, and now one, now the other gets the day, and still the fight renews itself as if for the first time, under new names and hot personalities.

Such an irreconcilable antagonism, of course, must have a correspondent depth of seat in the human constitution. It is the opposition of Past and Future, of Memory and Hope, of the Understanding and the Reason. It is the primal antagonism, the appearance in trifles of the two poles of nature.

You who quarrel with the arrangements of society, and are willing to embroil all, and risk the indisputable good that exists, for the chance of better, live, move, and have your being in this, and your deeds contradict your words every day. For as you cannot jump from the ground without using the resistance of the ground, nor put out the boat to sea, without shoving from the shore, nor attain liberty without rejecting obligation, so you are under the necessity of using the Actual order of things, in order to disuse it; to live by it, whilst you wish to take away its life.

The past has baked your loaf, and in the strength of its bread you would break up the oven. But you are betrayed by your own nature. You also are conservatives. However men please to style themselves, I see no other than a conservative party. You are not only identical with us in your needs, but also in your methods and aims. You quarrel with my conservatism, but it is to build up one of your own; it will have a new beginning, but the same course and end, the same trials, the same passions.

A Pew for Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke

Past and Future.

Memory and Hope.

Understanding and Reason.

The past has baked your loaf.

You are also conservatives.

Politics and religion help define and anchor a person's ethics, their view of the world around them and their place in it. Politics and religion are both filled with unknowns, a reliance on faith, and frequent opportunities to bare our hypocrisy, naked to the world.

Gandhi said: *"I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind, and that I could not do unless I took part in politics. The whole gamut of man's activities today constitutes an indivisible whole. You cannot divide social, economic, political and purely religious work into watertight compartments. I do not know any religion apart from human activity. It provides a moral basis to all other activities which they would otherwise lack, reducing life to a maze of 'sound and fury signifying nothing'"*.

This morning, I want to share some of what I've learned about politics and philosophy and religion and history. I want to defend conservatism's place in liberal religion.

In its contemporary form, Unitarian Universalism often mixes liberal religion and liberal politics. This blending of liberal politics and religion can make conservative and moderate UUs uncomfortable and, at times, feel unwelcome and out of place. Here, in a church that calls for "a free and responsible search for truth", we need to avoid the hubris of claiming the righteousness of any one political ideology. This is a challenge that can be met, if we can recognize that liberal politics has no lock on liberal religion.

I've always felt a natural affinity with the politics of the right. It turns out that I was born that way. Scientists have shown that your political leanings closely follow certain hard wiring in our brains. Areas linked to social connectedness, which involves friends and the world at large, light up in liberals' brains, along with regions associated with risk and uncertainty. Conservatives show more neural activity in parts of the brain associated with tight social connectedness, which focuses on family and country and in areas that are affected by threatening situations..

Is it any wonder that we continue to battle over what Emerson called “an irreconcilable antagonism”? The good news is that our brains can be rewired.

Unitarian Universalism, despite its principle of a free and responsible search for truth, seems to be having a problem with this antagonism.

At last month’s UU General Assembly in Providence, one of the keynote speakers was met with thunderous applause when she said that Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell were on her God’s Mistake List. She said it in jest, but thousands of UUs roared in approval. Mistakes of God?

This excerpt from a blog post from one of our own former ministers:

“Most UU congregations are composed of political liberals. There is a reason for this: the theological, anthropological, and philosophical viewpoints that make up religious liberalism lead to political liberalism when applied to this culture and society.” ... “Political conservatives, and their party, exploit anti-gay fear and bigotry for partisan advantage. Everybody knows this, but it makes political conservative UU's feel isolated and rejected if somebody at church says it out loud.”

Here at First Unitarian, a survey taken last fall by our Ministerial Search Committee found that 92% of respondents would be comfortable with a politically liberal minister, but only 27% would be comfortable with a politically conservative minister. Our own congregation sees liberal religion as being bound tightly to liberal politics.

The UUA acknowledges that conservatives and moderates are viewed unfavorably within Unitarian Universalism. At the 2012 UU General Assembly in Phoenix, there was a workshop that focused on the viewpoints of politically conservative and moderate UUs.

A UU World article discussed the success of the workshop, which drew 175 people:

“The Rev. Nancy McDonald-Ladd earned a hearty round of applause from the crowd when she asked, “If the litmus test for ‘people like me’ becomes political affiliation, are we not mirroring the exact political partisanship and brokenness present in the world outside our doors, and are we not called—as faithful, courageous people—to something higher than mirroring the worst of the world around us?”

Another workshop attendee said, “It is hypocritical of us to promise a free and responsible search for truth and meaning but quickly let it be known that *some* responsible searches are more equal than others.”

The past decade has been unnerving for conservatives. It started with the destruction of Americans' complacent sense of security at home on September 11. Over the past decade we've been let down by the banks, Wall Street, and the real estate market. Technology was upsetting the social order, not by evolution, but by revolution, as our means of communicating, our news sources, and our entertainment methods were replaced and the future arrived much too quickly. Financial institutions, churches, labor unions, schools, our political parties, you name it, the institutions of society that had been carefully built and handed down to us, were failing us.

For conservatives and independents, the Tea Party movement became their means of defending and restoring the social order that had been destroyed. As most of you know, I founded the local Tea party group in the spring of 2009.

Becoming the face and voice of the Tea Party movement in Central Massachusetts created a challenge for me. For some reason, the media thought that I was a skilled political pundit. I regularly fielded calls from the Telegram, the Globe, the Herald, local talk radio, the AP, Reuters. Politicians thought that had the power to sway thousands of voters their way.

The truth was that I was not a skilled pundit. I said a few stupid things and knew nothing about political campaigns, but I soon learned how to take a position and sound half coherent. I was just a small businessman and a husband and a father who was concerned about the direction our country had taken over the past few decades. I had a new role though, and I needed to grow into it.

I was being asked questions about policies that I knew that I had opinions on, but I didn't really have an idea of the why. They just fit into what I thought was the conservative bucket. If you asked me what conservatism was, I would have to answer with a list of policies, many of which I disagreed with. I'd also be able to articulate some very broad principles based upon the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

My journey with the Tea Party movement forced me to take a hard look at my beliefs. It exposed me to ideas that challenged my perception of current politics and how I identified my own political philosophy. Over time, I came to an understanding of those who hated our movement, enough of an understanding that we were able to find common ground with them. What I learned affected how I thought about my personal spiritual beliefs. In fact, my Tea Party journey connected my political beliefs with my spiritual beliefs and gave me a new appreciation for Unitarian Universalism's roots in Enlightenment liberalism. It gave me a principled personal creed and a purpose beyond my home and work.

I started studying the philosophy that shaped our founders and that shaped current political thought. Names that I've heard and some that I had never heard of: Locke, Rousseau, Mills, Rand, Kirk, Bastiat, Hayek, Spooner, Rothbard. I had 3,000 years of political philosophy to learn, but there was a shortcut, because I really only needed to know about the two men who defined modern political philosophy: Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine. A recent book called *The Great Debate* details their relationship, the ideas that made them opponents, and their writings that have shaped political philosophy for the past 220 years.

Edmund Burke is the first person to articulate the modern political philosophy of conservatism. Burke was a supporter of the American Revolution, but he saw the destructive French Revolution as a threat to civil order.

Burke was defending the existing social order, aristocracy and the monarchy, against the threat of radical Enlightenment liberalism. Conservatism at its core was a response to liberalism. Burke believed that this upstart philosophy would wipe away the old order and centuries of social progress. He saw the existing civil society, social norms, religious institutions, and political order as the result of many generations of development. The wisdom of each successive generation built on and improved on the gifts of the past. He felt that each generation owed it to future generations to act as good stewards of these gifts.

Edmund Burke defined conservatism as a philosophy of reform. He believed that reform should be slow and deliberate. Burke supported the American revolutionaries, advocated for the rights and privileges of Irish Catholics and vigorously fought against the mistreatment of the natives of India by the East India Company. Burke's conservatism was not cold and static. It was evolutionary.

Thomas Paine was the most successful pamphleteer in the late 18th century. He thought that Burke's respect for the past was hogwash. To him, everything began anew with each birth. We were all equal in nature and society's bondage to the past and the future was illegitimate and unnatural. Burke's philosophy asked one to look back to the beginning of civilization and all that had happened since. Paine went further, he wanted to look back to a time before civilization, to nature and forget about everything that happened in between.

Paine said: "The error of those who reason by precedents drawn from antiquity respecting the rights of man, is that they do not go far enough into antiquity. They do not go the whole way." The whole way meant to go beyond history. Go to nature. Doing so releases every generation and every individual from the social circumstances of their birth.

Paine believed that no generation could be burdened by the unjust social order of prior generations and no generation could commit the next generation to carry existing social and political structures forward.

Burke believed in evolutionary progress. Paine believed in revolution. Tear down that which does not work and rebuild anew. Burke wanted to reform and repair the political structure that had advanced Western civilization for centuries.

Burke wanted order and security. Paine wanted justice and equality. These are the same debates that divide us today.

Understanding the root of our political philosophy can give us a deeper understanding of our own beliefs and of those that we disagree with. It often works for religion, and it can work for politics.

Political theorist and historian, Russell Kirk, said:

In essence, the conservative person is simply one who finds the permanent things more pleasing than Chaos and Old Night. (Yet conservatives know, with Burke, that healthy "change is the means of our preservation.") A people's historic continuity of experience, says the conservative, offers a guide to policy far better than the abstract designs of coffee-house philosophers.

Russell Kirk died in 1994, so he knew that the conservative label had been tarnished by party politics that held little regard for Burkean philosophy. Kirk and Burke would be dismayed by the language 21st century conservative politicians. To be fair though, Thomas Paine would find little in common with today's progressive statist politicians.

What I learned about Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke and a few others has given me a deeper appreciation for the natural or God-given source of every individual's inherent worth and dignity and the rights that come as a blessing at birth: the right to self-determination, free of coercion, whether from any government or from the existing social order. Our founders had created a system of government that was crafted in the hope and ideals of enlightenment liberalism, but also created an order that would become the new standard for American conservatism.

So, now, how do we reconcile conservative thought with Unitarian Universalism? As a starting point, I looked to the 7 UU principles and to Russell Kirk's 10 Conservative Principles

I won't read Kirk's 10 Conservative Principles because of time constraints, but some examples are:

- *The conservative believes that there exists an enduring moral order.*
- *The conservative adheres to custom, convention, and continuity.*
- *Conservatives are persuaded that freedom and property are closely linked,*
- *The conservative perceives the need for prudent restraints upon power.*

The inherent worth and dignity of every individual was enshrined in the Declaration of Independence as “all men are created equal”. Our founding documents defined our moral order and the need for prudent restraints upon power. How ironic it is that American conservatism is seeking to preserve enlightenment liberalism. These are shared values that bind us, not divide us.

The interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part is more than our environment. It includes the process of life and it includes those who came before us, those that are with us, and those who will follow. We are bound in a web of time through the wisdom and institutions that give us the blessings of our lives today.

It would be impossible to completely align any political philosophy with religious principles, but there is nothing in the 7 UU principles that are counter to true conservative philosophy. In fact, here at First Unitarian we retain an abiding respect for the traditions and gifts of the past. Our former ministers watch over us today. We read from the ancients texts. We benefit from wealth endowed from prior generations. We maintain religious liberal principles with deep and old roots. Ours is a church where Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke can share a pew.

Emerson concluded his lecture on Conservatism with these words: “The boldness of the hope men entertain transcends all former experience. It calms and cheers them with the picture of a simple and equal life of truth and piety. And this hope flowered on what tree? It was not imported from the stock of some celestial plant, but grew here on the wild crab of conservatism. It is much that this old and vituperated system of things has borne so fair a child. It predicts that amidst a planet peopled with conservatives, one Reformer may yet be born.”

Past and Future.

Memory and Hope.

Understanding and Reason.

You cannot jump from the ground without using the resistance of the ground, nor put out the boat to sea, without shoving from the shore.

Kenneth Mandile
July 20, 2014
