

The Courage of Conviction
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John Pavlovitz writes brilliant, fierce critiques of our contemporary political culture from the standpoint of a Christian who takes the message of Jesus seriously—that the highest profession of faith is to treat others with compassion, respect, and justice. The reading you’ve just heard comes from a blog post called ‘To my fellow exhausted Americans,’ and it’s about the weariness so many have felt after the recent elections.

As with most elections, the results of this last one were mixed for Americans who care about democratic principles and about protection for marginalized and vulnerable people. Nationally and in our own state, some of their hopes were fulfilled on election day, and some were dashed. Locally, some folks I hoped to see win did not, and some amendments I would rather not see in our state constitution passed, though two of the worst did not.

For many people, the weeks leading up to the elections were grueling because they were working hard and long to secure the outcomes they were looking for. For others, the election season was exhausting because there was so much rancor, so many lies and distortions, so much fear about how the results might play out over the next two years at least and potentially much, much longer. Whatever the source of the tension, now that the election has passed, some of us have found ourselves looking around thinking, what now?

A few years ago after a fiercely contested Presidential election, a Presbyterian colleague of mine in an interfaith clergy group said that he’d told his congregation just before election day that if the Republican won, we religious people would find ourselves with an urgent call to hold the new President to account for the Biblical responsibility of helping the poor, protecting widows and orphans, and proclaiming release to captives; we would have to insist that the new administration must love the stranger, and let the oppressed go free. On the other hand, if the Democratic candidate won, we religious people would. . . find ourselves with an urgent call to hold the new President to account for the Biblical responsibility of helping the poor, protecting widows and orphans, and proclaiming release to captives; we would have to insist that the new administration must love the stranger, and let the oppressed go free.

The role of religious communities in electoral politics is not to secure victory or defeat for particular candidates or propositions; it’s to advance values that are at the foundation of our faith. In our particular case, as a Unitarian Universalist congregation we have covenanted to affirm and promote a set of principles, to embody them as best we can ourselves, and to make them real in the world we live in. That work doesn’t begin or end with elections; it extends far beyond the spheres of politics and government.

Still, elections do matter; they have genuine practical impacts of the lives of real people. I remember looking around when I went to vote on Election Day, and noticing all the other people who were there with me. It was exciting to be part of such a relatively high-turnout election, but at the same time I felt apprehensive, and I found myself trying to guess how the folks I was looking at were going to vote. It wasn't just a matter of thinking, 'Oh, I bet he's a Republican,' or 'look at those sandals, she's a Democrat for sure.' It was looking at someone and wondering if they were hoping to make it harder for someone else to vote, or to make it easier to send someone to jail without due process, or if they were choosing a candidate who has promised to take away some people's right to inhabit the gender of their body in the way that they understand and experience it.

Of course, most of those decisions wouldn't have too much personal impact on me—yet. As a straight, white, currently able-bodied, middle-class, cis-gendered male at least two generations removed from my family's most recent immigration history, I have the privilege of not being targeted for oppression—so far. My religious liberty and my health care are at some risk, but my advantage in other categories can probably shield me from the worst. Maybe you're in the same boat.

But that's not true for everyone. I can't help imagining how different it would be if I were looking around at those folks in the line thinking, 'maybe that guy wants my mom to be arrested and deported' or 'does she want to have my right to get married taken away?' or 'I wonder if you want to have the right to make medical decisions about my body.' Suddenly it's not just a casual mental exercise to pass the time while I'm waiting in line. Suddenly the people around me look dangerous, and I can't tell just by looking who my friends are—or even if I have any.

You may be surprised to hear this, but I'm a reluctant social justice warrior—I don't like the conflict or the uncomfortable conversations John Pavlovitz writes about. I know I tend to get angry and snappish; I don't like that feeling at all, and I know it makes me less persuasive. . . Rallies are uplifting and energizing, but I know they don't really transform society in and of themselves; they just fire us up and send us forth to do the hard long work of real, enduring change. People like Malala are inspiring, but I don't see myself in that heroic light.

The truth is, between elections, sometimes I'd like to just recede into contemplating the beauty of the Universe, exploring the deep meanings to be found in the events of our everyday lives, and celebrating the many gifts of living in spiritual community together. I don't really *enjoy* putting myself out there as the spokesperson for social causes; I'd rather offer spiritual support, motivation, guidance, and sustenance for people who do like to be in the vanguard.

But then I think: Someone needs to know they are not living in danger alone. Someone needs me not to snuggle up in my blanket of privilege and hibernate until 2020. Someone needs me to stay visibly engaged in working to make a world of justice, compassion, equity, and freedom for all people; someone needs to know that I, too, am working in my own way to heal a planet that is

coming dangerously close to a crisis in its capacity to sustain all the living populations—human and otherwise—that are utterly dependent on it for our very existence.

I believe this is a time when it's important for us to find ways to become visible as allies, as supporters and protectors, as co-conspirators in creating a just, open, equitable society. When bigotry and white dominance and male entitlement and heteronormativity and greed are making their last desperate effort to hold onto power in our nation and in the world, having the courage of our convictions means making ourselves known to those who are marginalized or threatened in this cultural climate. People who are looking around and knowing that some of their neighbors either mean them harm or don't care if harm comes to them need to know with just as much certainty and clarity that there is a place, a community of faith, where they can expect to find acceptance, affirmation, and celebration of who they are.

I snapped a picture last Sunday of a banner attached to the wrought-iron fence in front of the Charleston Unitarian Church, one of our oldest congregations and most beautiful sanctuaries in the Southern US. There's a smaller version of it framed in our foyer. It says: In this congregation, we believe: Love is love; black lives matter; climate change is real; no human being is illegal; women's rights are human rights; all genders are whole, holy, and good.

Our Board began to speak last year about hanging a similar banner here outside our Meetinghouse, to tell the world who we are and what we stand for. It's not a simple decision; aside from the physical logistics of where to put it and how to hang it, there are risks to identifying ourselves publicly, including the likelihood that, like almost every other congregation which has hung a banner like this one, we'll have to repair or replace it every now and then.

Still, I believe it's time for us to move that conversation forward. When hatred is being encouraged to show its face in public, it's time for love to be just as open. When bigotry is being proclaimed in the halls of government, it's time for acceptance and affirmation to proclaim themselves. When ignorance and willful disregard of science is being openly woven into public policy, it's time to publicly embrace facing the facts.

At last year's General Assembly in Kansas City, our UUA President the Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray proclaimed that 'This is no time for a casual faith.' It was a call to action, a call to engagement in the issues and struggles of our time, a time when public figures are openly using the deceptive language of hatred and division, urging some of our nations' people to be suspicious and hostile toward others while those same leaders enrich themselves and others like them, and entrench themselves deeper and deeper in power. For many of us, it was a call to be actively involved in the political process of this summer and fall.

But 'this is no time for a casual faith' can't just mean that we're called to political action or social justice advocacy in the public square. Politics is not our religion; we are not the spiritual wing of the Democratic Party or the Green Party or any other party. Fully embodying our faith takes more than elections; it takes more than voting or working to get out the vote.

‘No time for a casual faith’ is also a call to live our faith in other ways, ways that are defined not by what we are working against, but by what we are working for. We are not only called to resist hatred; we are called to proclaim and embody love. We are not only called to shelter and protect vulnerable people; we are called to celebrate and support the lives of those who live on our culture’s margins. We are not only called to reject the use of systematic falsehood as a political tool; we are called to proclaim the value and the power of seeking and speaking the truth.

Your Board made outreach a goal for this year, and we’re exploring several ways to make ourselves more visible in the wider community around us. Hanging a banner is one of those ways, a way that proclaims who we are for the world to see. Having the courage of conviction means more than just proclaiming our values in public, though; it also means living out those values as best we possibly can.

Having the courage of our convictions means deepening our own spiritual quest, our search for the highest truths we can know. It means expanding our understanding of the faiths of the world, and of our own tradition. It means supporting the young families who have come through our doors in nurturing the spiritual lives of their children. It means increasing our visible outreach to people in search of a spiritually alive, radically inclusive, justice-centered community of faith, and it means doing everything we can to *be* that spiritually alive, radically inclusive, justice-centered community of faith.

Spiritual and social activist Marianne Williamson once wrote that our joy about the world we want to build is far more powerful and persuasive than our anger about the world as it is, or our fear of what it might become. May we always seek to bring that world into being, and may we do everything we can to make ourselves the embodiment of that loving and beloved community, a beacon lighting the way toward a world of justice, equity, and compassion for all.