

Politics and Religion

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

July 6, 2025

Reflection on the Theme – Alexis Balkowitsch

Exactly a month ago—June 6th—was the 81st Anniversary of D Day. There was a rally in downtown Vancouver that afternoon to support Veterans’ services, and I showed up with this sign—a bit censored here since it’s Sunday Morning, but it shows a picture of my grandfather, Douglas Ripley, and reads “My grandfather didn’t survive Anzio for this *crap* to happen here’.

I ended up being interviewed by a Columbian reporter at the rally. I gave her a brief history of my grandfather—he was in the US Army Air Force, stationed in North Africa and Italy during World War II, joined the Vancouver police force when he retired from the military. I said he lived his life in service to the nation and to this community, and he would be appalled at what’s happening here now.

But later that evening I started feeling a little uncomfortable about what I’d said. I couldn’t stop thinking about my grandfather—and second-guessing my beliefs of HIS beliefs.

This is the man I remember. Grandpa Ripley. Retired policeman, pipe smoker, and dog lover. He was missing the middle finger on his left hand, and sometimes he’d draw a face on the stub and crawl it up my back like a spider to make me laugh. He taught me how to whistle. He always brought me gifts from his vacations in Hawaii and Reno, and brought a special stuffed animal to the hospital for me when I had to stay overnight for surgery. I only got to know him for 5 years—he passed in 1983—but I loved him. So much so that when we were in public, I would shout “Grandpa!” and immediately run after any man who looked like him, much to my mother’s dismay.

This is the man my mom knew, who I learned about years later through her stories. Staff Sergeant Doug Ripley, known as ‘Sarge’ or ‘Rip’ to his friends. Her dad. He drank, and he smoked, and he was kind of a military tough guy, enmeshed in a culture we know now as problematic in a lot of ways. And since my mom was a smart, stubborn, hippie...well, their relationship was a little complicated. I heard the stories about how he forced her to sit at the table until morning when she refused to eat organ meat. How he forbade her from accepting a scholarship to Reed College in 1966 because he said it was ‘full of commies’. How he’d run background checks on all her boyfriends. But I also heard about how he cared and connected with people—about the relationships he built with local people when he was stationed in North Africa and later in Japan in the late 50s, and was genuinely interested in all the places he lived. And his belief in a Police Officer’s duty to protect AND SERVE. Once in the early 2000s, I came home shaken after being harassed and intimidated by a cop. “Your grandfather would be LIVID,” my mom said. “That is not how an officer is supposed to behave.”

So, how do I think this man would react to what’s happening today? Well, People—just like Politics and Religion—are very complicated. I’ll never know for sure, and in some ways that bothers me...but in the end, maybe it doesn’t matter. What I do have is a touchstone: my own belief that the caring heart of a tough man, a man who served his nation and his community and loved a little girl so fiercely, would continue to care about This Nation in its darkest hour.

***Politics and Religion*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

Politics and Religion: I've been thinking about the recent inquiry we got through the website about how political we were at UUCV. Someone who thinks of themselves as holding both Unitarian values and politically conservative ones didn't feel at home at First Church in Portland because they were "too political." I preached a whole sermon on this topic recently, but apparently this question isn't out of my system yet. There's a lot to it. Gandhi was to have said "those who believe religion and politics aren't connected don't understand either."

This Fourth of July weekend, I thought I'd reflect a little bit on our history. I usually call this my Interdependence Day sermon, as I think independence is not a realistic goal. We are dependent upon one another and the universe – it's the nature of that dependence, whether it is mutual, uni-directional or coercive that matters.

The colonies wanted self-determination and didn't want to be controlled by King and Country – an ocean away. And so this war of Independence was fought between 1775 and 1782. It is the Declaration of Independence; the declaration made at the beginning of the war that we celebrate on the 4th of July. I used to watch the 1972 film, *1776* to celebrate the fourth. Now I'm rather into the 2020 film, *Hamilton*. Anything to keep us and our dog in the basement away from the noisy fireworks. Both films were Broadway musicals first, then films. Both are fictional based on real historical figures, but the emphasis is on *fiction*.

20 years ago, in 2005, All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma developed a curriculum about the Unitarian and Universalist and Unitarian Universalist religion in America called *Our American Roots*. George W. Bush was the president then, and if you're old enough, you may recall there was a lot of religion in his politics. He was said to be the most openly religious president in generations. An evangelical Christian, though Methodist in practice, Bush did not shy away from religious language to support his political decisions. And there was quite a bit of revisionist history in his understanding of this country's founding religion and principles. So, All Souls created this curriculum to help Unitarian Universalist Americans understand how much our faith, in fact, was at the root of this country's founding.

Among the signers of the Declaration were 2 Unitarians, John Adams and William Ellery, 2 Universalists – Josiah Bartlett and Dr. Benjamin Rush and 2 Deists – Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, which have been sometimes categorized as Unitarian, though neither were church-going.

Quakers, Congregationalists and Episcopalians outnumbered the Unitarians and Universalists by far, but they are also on the religiously liberal spectrum of Christianity.

Center for American Progress in 2008 published an article that said "This notion—that our country's roots are explicitly Christian—is both foolish and wrong." This All Souls curriculum highlighted the role of Unitarian and Universalist values in the founding of this country.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

But of course, enslaved people and women did not give their consent. In fact, during the writing of the Declaration of Independence, Abigail Adams – another famous Unitarian wrote a letter to her husband, John saying,

“Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice or Representation.”

In a different letter she writes:

“I wish most sincerely there was not a Slave in the province. It allways appeared a most iniquitious Scheme to me-fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have. You know my mind upon this Subject.”

Abigail is reported to have been furious when the Declaration of Independence’s “most Manly Sentiments,” denouncing the slave trade were struck from the final draft.

I didn’t learn that fact in this 20-year-old curriculum, but rather the Massachusetts Historical Society who have her letters online and the National Women’s History Museum website. This old curriculum, in fact, doesn’t treat the “most iniquitous scheme,” as Abigail puts it, in any real depth or seriousness. It is a mentioned injustice, but not central to the story.

This old curriculum has been sunsetted along with a whole bunch of Tapestry of Faith curriculum in part because twenty years ago Unitarian Universalists weren’t understanding white supremacy culture as we do now, and didn’t take seriously our ancestor’s role in perpetuating a morally unjust and unjustifiable system of slavery. What this curriculum does do, however, is draw a direct line between the religious beliefs of these founders and their politics.

For example, and I’m reading from the curriculum here,

“A broad sense of Unitarian theology began to emerge in various ways in the American colonies, as well as after the Revolution. The established churches of New England Congregationalism had created a covenantal instead of overt credal basis for their churches, primarily in the Cambridge Platform of 1648. This helped to build into the system a sense of theological freedom and the importance of individual conscience for those joining in a voluntary association.”

This leads to the American separation of church and state.

“Checks and balances, Jefferson,” wrote John Adams to his friend at Montecello, “are our only Security, for the progress of Mind, as well as the Security of Body. Every species of Christians would persecute Deists, as either Sect would persecute another, if it had unchecked and unbalanced Power. Nay, the Deists would persecute Christians, and Atheists would persecute Deists, with as unrelenting Cruelty, as any Christian would persecute them or one another. Know thyself, Human nature!”

Theology may *seem* to be about God, but God is the reflection of how it is we humans understand ourselves. Theology is the study of human nature – whether we believe we are born good or evil, neutral, whether we can or in what ways we change or are stuck in our ways – “know thyself, human nature!”

When I first married Stuart, his family was still gathering periodically at Port Aransas, Texas, in a resort called Port Royal. On the door of the suite where the family gathered was a sign that said, “No politics or religion!” “Know thyself, human nature!” and indeed they did. Like many families these days, there are deep and painful splits in his family along political and religious lines. My family of origin, on the other hand, continues to not talk about the subjects with family members of differing views.

Like Alexis, I like to think that my Republican grandfathers – they were both Republicans, that they would recognize what is happening on the Right in this country as problematic, but of course, I can’t really know. I’m just grateful they didn’t have to live long enough to see it. I’m glad my dad died before we saw a second Trump presidency and I trust my mom will live long enough to see the end of it.

What the founders believed about religion when this country began is that it – religion – was the primary way we imparted values. Because there were founders of such different beliefs, they understood the reality of pluralism and importance of protecting it. They wanted this country to be principled and moral – it was a moral argument against the King, in fact, but the unforgivable sin they committed was knowing slavery was evil and then removing the language from the constitution that condemned it.

It’s interesting to me that this sin is explored in the 1972 musical of all white actors, *1776*, but pretty much ignored in *Hamilton* despite its BIPOC cast. The song *Molasses to Rum* in *1776* is one of those songs that I sometimes fast-forward through because it is a depressing depiction of Northern hypocrisy with regard to slavery. It’s sung by the delegate from South Carolina, Edward Rutledge. I fast-forward through it, I’m sure, because it makes me uncomfortable, as it should. That is the intent. But it’s powerful and impactful, and depicts the certain knowledge that our founders knew they were wrong to strike this language from the passage about the King’s crimes:

"He has waged cruel war against human nature itself," Jefferson wrote, "violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither."

Jefferson wrote that. Jefferson, who held people as property. Who bought and sold people as property. Who fathered children with one of the people he “owned.” One of the founding fathers Unitarians proudly claimed as our own, because of the language in that letter – that shames us now. O My. “Know thyself, human nature!”, wrote John Adams to Thomas Jefferson.

“Slavery’s an institution.,” said David Thorson, quoted by author Clint Smith. ‘In Jefferson’s lifetime it becomes a system. So what is the slave system? It is a system of exploitation, a system of inequality and exclusion, a system where people are owned as property and held down by physical and psychological force, a system being justified even by people who know slavery is morally wrong. By doing what? Denying the very humanity of those who are enslaved solely on the basis of the color of their skin.’”

How the Word is Passed takes a unique approach to the history of slavery in this country, by visiting locations where slavery was present and learning how the people in that place tell, reckon with, or evade the history of slavery.

As soon as I think I understand the history of this country, I learn something new. The reading was excerpted from the chapter on Monticello, but it was in the chapter on the Whitney Plantation that took my breath away.

I'll go back a bit for some context.

Last summer, as I was getting ready to travel to Romania, I preached a sermon on Transylvanian Unitarian history beginning with the legend of Count Dracula based on the 15th century Romanian prince Vlad Dracul III, known as Vlad the Impaler. He was known for defending his territory from invaders by impaling his victims, skewering them on tall wooden stakes and leaving them on display along the borders of this territory to discourage invading armies. I then went on to say in that sermon, "If a hundred years after that, the Edict of Torda proclaimed religious liberty and ushered in a peaceful reformation, then I believe there's gotta be hope for our time."

I remember thinking how 'Middle Ages' displaying heads on stakes seemed, and then I read the chapter in Clint Smith's book on the Whitney Plantation...

So, again, 15th century is Vlad the Impaler
16th century – 1568 is the Edict of Torda

But in the 19th century – in 1811 there was an uprising of enslaved men in Louisiana led by Charles Deslondes. I'm quoting Clint Smith:

"Composed of hundreds of people, Deslondes' army advanced along the serpentine path of southern Louisiana's River Road to New Orleans with a military discipline that surprised many of their adversaries. It is remarkable to consider that hundreds of enslaved people, who came from different countries, with different native languages, and different tribal affiliations, were able to organize themselves as effectively as they did....Within 48 hours, local militia and federal troops suppressed the rebellion. Deslondes briefly escaped the initial wave of slaughter by hiding in the swamp but was quickly captured and executed. His hands were chopped off, the bones in his legs were shattered by bullets, and he was burned over a bale of straw. Many of the rebels were slaughtered on-site, their heads cut off and posted on stakes that lined the levee, a warning to other enslaved people that this was the price to pay for rebellion." End quote

I really did think putting heads on stakes was so 'Middle Ages'. Now I know better. I'm embarrassed by my own naivete at times, by my own historical ignorance. And ashamed that my ancestors – my religious ancestors, if not my familial ancestors – compromised their values and what they knew to be right and true.

Politics and religion are both about power. Politics, social power and governance. Religion, the power of values and what we hold most dear. Most of us want our politics to align with our values, and so our religion to influence our politics, even as we don't wish the state to dictate our religion or values.

John Adams should have listened to his wife, Abigail. “Remember the Ladies. ...You know my mind about this Subject.”

Well, you know my mind about this Subject. And the subject of politics and religion. Like Gandhi, I think “those who believe religion and politics aren’t connected don’t understand either.”

Now that we know – and I know, some of you always knew – but once we know our history, we are obligated to make amends – “heal historic injustices” is the language in our Unitarian Universalist bylaws. Our core religious values call us to deeper justice built by our courageous choices. We must build a faith set free from fear. I believe, like Stuart sang, that hate is not our destiny and that there will be a better day. But it is up to us to help make those things true. We must dig deep into our values, and live into them faithfully with our choices. And we need each other and this community to keep ourselves honest. May it be so.