

# **One Nation, Many Paths**

**a reflection  
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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A headline in the New York Times on Thursday caught my eye: “Two Nations, Under God” it read.

In the days following this week’s election, there have been lots of articles written, lots of letters and emails exchanged, lots of talking heads being scratched. Exactly what happened at the polls on Tuesday?

Yet of all the reading and listening and thinking and praying I’ve done in the past five days – that New York Times headline sums it all up for me: “Two Nations, Under God.”

I suppose it could have gone on to say, “Two Nations Under God, Divisible, With Liberty and Justice for Some” – at least, that’s my fear. But the point was made, nonetheless. As Orlando Sentinel columnist Kathleen Parker summed it up, “The two-America divide isn’t fiction, after all.”

My son Patrick, who’s in third grade, is studying geography these days. One of his assignments this week was to color in the “red” and “blue” states on the map of the U.S. When he was done, it looked like a map of two different countries (three actually – the blue Northeast, and the blue west coast; and the contiguous red of the South, Midwest, Plains and Rocky Mountains in between).

You can see the same divide even if you go to smaller maps. Take most any state (Ohio will do), and color in the “red” and the “blue,” and you’ll see that the cities and urban areas stand out in stark contrast to the non-urban areas, which are almost all the other color. The fact is, every major city in Ohio has

a Democratic mayor, and most have Democrat-controlled city councils. In the rural areas (and, significantly, in the suburban and exurban areas), nearly every elected representative is a Republican.

Bring the microscope into even closer focus, and you'll find the same thing going on in neighborhoods. Before the election, my family and I used to do random yard-sign polls while driving to and from school or the store. It never ceased to amaze us how many next-door-neighbors were battling it out in this battleground state. In one yard, a Kerry sign; in the very next yard – sometimes crammed right up to the property line – a Bush sign.

Two nations, under God, indeed.

Now I'm not here today to preach to one of those nations, or the other. I know they're both represented in the sanctuary this morning – and that's as it should be. What's not as it should be is the depth of the division itself. Instead of “two nations under God,” I'd like to propose a different approach: “one nation, many paths.”

Our motto here at Heritage is “one church, many paths.” As we look around us this morning, we see Christians and Buddhists, atheists and Jews, pagans and agnostics – yet, somehow, week after week, year after year, we are able to worship together, and to love one another, without the use of those labels, without finger-pointing or claims of religious superiority. As we look around us, too, we see people of different ethnicities, different income levels, different races, different creeds and sexualities and – yes – different political outlooks – people who come together to form something bigger and more meaningful than they could possibly find in a community of enforced, cookie-cutter conformity. “We need not think alike, to love alike.”

In doing this remarkable work of building unity through diversity – and it is remarkable, though we seldom stop to think about it as such – we Unitarian Universalists truly are a beacon of hope at this time of national division – a shining example of what our country could become. Imagine not just one church, many paths – but one nation, many paths!

Friends, the good news today – and there is good news today – is that we're already halfway there. America already has many paths. The diversity I've

just pointed out here in this sanctuary – let’s admit it – is nothing compared to the much greater diversity in our society at large.

As I said, we in the United States, the great melting pot, already know many paths. What we need to work on right now, is the “one nation” part. The “indivisible” part.

So let’s focus that lens back out from the neighborhoods and the counties and the states – back out to the boundaries of this great nation. There was a picture circulating around the internet this week – probably the work of a computer graphics artist – a map that had taken the shades of red and blue in this election (which, after all, in most places, were 51 percent red and 49 percent blue anyway), and blended them into a beautiful, brilliant purple. One nation, many paths.

This concept – this idea of a “purple” America – one that, when examined more closely under that microscope, would certainly reveal not just tints of red and blue, but, in fact, a veritable rainbow of colors. This approach, I believe, is our best hope for healing the deep wounds that have been engendered this year by what one analyst has gone so far as to call “our electoral civil war.”

But any reconciliation we will achieve, any return to the idea of “one nation,” can come only if we are willing to embrace the idea – and the fact – that there are “many paths” in this united nation. Just as there are Christians and Buddhists and pagans and atheists in this sanctuary, so there are those, and many, many more religious faiths in America. Just as there are Republicans and Democrats and independents and Libertarians and Greens in this sanctuary, so there are those, and many, many more political outlooks in America. Just as there are gays and lesbians and heterosexuals and single moms and single dads and large families and families with no children in this sanctuary, so there are those, and many, many more in America. We really are one nation, many paths.

Now if only it were that simple! If only everyone embraced the idea that all people, all paths should be honored. But we know this is not the case. I know that many of you shared the same difficulty I had on election night, explaining to my son that right here in Ohio, people had voted, by a two-to-one margin, to outlaw marriage for gay and lesbian couples. It broke my heart to have to tell Patrick that the place he calls home had overwhelmingly

chosen to deny the right to get married to couples for whom I have performed wedding ceremonies, people whom he knows and loves.

There was a deep, aching pain in my heart, too, this week, that Oklahoma – where I once lived – elected as its newest U.S. Senator a man who advocated the death penalty for doctors who perform abortions. There was pain in my heart that in South Carolina, where I once also lived, the newest U.S. Senator had run on a platform advocating banning gays and lesbians from teaching in public schools – even going so far as to say, in one debate, “I would have [the same opinion] when asked if a single woman who was pregnant and living with her boyfriend should be hired to teach my third-grade children.”

Well, I have a third-grade child. I am an American. And I have an opinion, too. But my opinion on this issue differs, as widely as an ocean between two nations, from that of South Carolina Sen. Jim DeMint. I guess that makes me “the loyal opposition.”

People such as DeMint, the pundits are telling us, were elected Tuesday not on the basis of issues – but on the basis of “values.” Where, I ask you, are the “values” in exclusivity and discrimination? Where are the values in the judging of others as “evil,” as unworthy of God’s or our love?

Let the one without sin cast the first stone. First take the plank out of your own eye, before pointing out the splinter in another’s. Love thy neighbor as thyself. These are the Christian values I espouse – and they are the Christian values Unitarians, and Universalists, have stood for, for centuries.

But as the choir sang so beautifully, a moment ago – “where there is hatred, let me sow love. Make me an instrument of thy peace.”

Yet many of us, myself included, wonder – how? How can we begin to move from “two nations under God,” toward what I believe is the promised land of “one nation, with many paths”? Where can those who, like me, value diversity and inclusion, compassion and cooperation, religious tolerance and freedom of expression – where can we find hope this morning?

One place I’d like to lift up is the Tikkun Community, founded by Michael Lerner – whom I quoted earlier in one of our readings. Lerner said, in an open, post-election letter to his followers, “Imagine ... insisting that a

serious religious person would never turn his [or her] back on the suffering of the poor; that the Bible's injunction to love one's neighbor requires us to provide health care for all; that the New Testament's command to turn the other cheek should give us a predisposition against responding to violence with violence...

“Imagine ... a new [kind of] bottom line, so that American institutions [are] judged [as] efficient and productive not only to the extent that they maximize money and power, but also to the extent that they maximize people's capacities to be loving and caring; ethically and ecologically sensitive; and capable of responding to the universe with awe and wonder.”

This, I believe, is our calling, as Unitarian Universalists today. Our calling as a congregation, at Heritage Church. Let our success in the weeks and years ahead be judged by how well we “maximize people's capacities to be loving and caring, ethically and ecologically sensitive, and capable of responding to the universe with awe and wonder.”

Change starts at home, an old Chinese proverb tells us. We who seek a change in our culture are best served by looking first to our own institutions – our own families, and churches, and civic groups – and creating there the change we hope to see in the world. We begin, then, right here – in this sanctuary, in this congregation which, we are fond of saying, is “one church, many paths.”

Imagine then taking what we have learned about the strength that is inherent in diversity, taking that idea out into the community around us. Imagine, for starters, telling those we know, just what it's like to be with someone who differs from us, yet sit quietly together on Sunday morning, in awe and reverence of the universe. Just what it's like to hold the hand of someone with whom you deeply disagree – and say aloud, together, an affirmation of your common, human spirituality.

Imagine what it would be like to be a vocal, outspoken – and at times, as I said last week, outraged – righteous institution of the “Religious Left.” You know, I had never heard that term before a few months ago, but I can tell you, it is growing on me. Whereas the “Religious Right” makes no bones about its desire to reshape our society – reshape it in ways antithetical to freedom of choice, equal rights, civil rights, and freedom of religion – the

far-too-timid “Religious Left” – which for centuries Unitarianism and Universalism led as a powerful civic force in this nation – is at a crossroads.

Let me be quick to point out – as our denominational president, Bill Sinkford, reminded us in a letter this Wednesday – Unitarian Universalism is not, cannot, need not be an arm of the political Left, or any political movement. We are a religious movement, embracing all politics, but looking, through a spiritual lens, at the social condition of our nation and our world, and called to speak out on issues that impact freedoms, both religious and civil.

Imagine, as Michael Lerner says, insisting, from a religious and ethical basis, that the poor, the family without health insurance, the victim of violence, the religious minority, the unemployed – should be the focus of our social and political efforts. Imagine speaking powerfully in the public forum about those values.

You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. The internet community – which was abuzz with activity and energy before the election – has become, for me, in the days since, a powerful source of ideas, of hope, of vision for the eventual transformation of our society. Never before in America have so many been so connected to one another, so easily. Let us take advantage of this opportunity. Let us reach out; let us build bridges.

As citizens, we are part of one great whole – one nation that is, or at least can be, big enough and strong enough to include all our paths. A nation that can, in fact, be strengthened when everyone is at the table – strengthened by the diversity of voices and opinions and values that naturally make up this cultural landscape. A nation that can – just as Heritage Church has done – find unity in diversity.

Which, at last, brings me back home. This morning – regardless of your political persuasion, regardless of your spiritual path – I am asking you to make a commitment. A commitment to becoming the kind of church that can make a difference in this world. A commitment, here at home at Heritage, to the principle of one church, many paths. And a commitment, through Heritage, to the principle of one nation, many paths.

There is much work to be done to heal our society’s wounds, to bind our society’s divisions, to make our beloved United States united once more.

Let us begin here. Let us begin today. And let us always imagine.

May it be so.

Namaste.

Amen.