



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

What Is “Liberal Fundamentalism?”

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An important part of our Unitarian Universalist heritage is the tradition of both a “free pulpit” and a “free pew.” The *freedom of the pulpit* means that I am encouraged to preach whatever I think will be significant and meaningful for us to consider. The *freedom of the pew* means that you are not expected to believe or do something simply because it is spoken from this or any other pulpit or podium.

That being said, once a year members and friends of this congregation contribute all sorts of items, events, offers, and opportunities to our annual auction. And each year my contribution is to preach a **sermon on the topic of the highest bidder's choice**: “whatever topic you are passionate about, or think would be particularly challenging, meaningful, or provocative.” So if there is a sermon you’ve been hoping to hear, our upcoming auction can be your chance.

Last year, Steve Berté was the highest bidder on the auction sermon, and he chose “**Beware Liberal Fundamentalism**” as the topic. Part of what he had in mind was the definition of Liberal Fundamentalism in Nathan Walker’s fascinating and provocative book *Cultivating Empathy: The Worth and Dignity of Every Person — Without Exception*. Dr. Walker defines Liberal Fundamentalism as “**when we who take pride in being open-minded close our minds—when we become what we set out against**” (84).

We Unitarian Universalists are part of the classical liberal tradition that does treasure open-mindedness. But at an even more foundational level, **classical liberalism is from the Latin root *liber*, meaning “free.”** We theological liberals tend to

have a gut-level inclination toward *freedom*, toward *liberty*, toward saying to each individual “You do you.” We are a big tent with room for lots of individual differences.

And **our Unitarian Universalist tent has been big enough historically—and it remains big enough today—to include those who are *conservative* in the best sense of the word**: caring about conservation of nature, upholding the beauty of traditions and rituals that have accrued deep meaning through the test of time, reminding us of the importance of community, authority, sanctity, and loyalty. And we do risk becoming Liberal Fundamentalists—becoming narrow-minded and bigoted—if we succumb to the temptation to *pre-judge* others based on stereotypes.

That being said, as we prepare to reflect on the dynamics of Liberal Fundamentalism, it is vital to be clear that there are important limits. Some beliefs and actions are beyond the pale. And drawing healthy boundaries does not make us Liberal Fundamentalists; it merely means **being clear about the lines that we cannot cross without sacrificing our core values**.

One classically liberal way of drawing such boundaries is summarized in the quote that, “**Your right to swing your fist ends where my nose begins.**” I affirm your freedom to swing your fist to your heart’s content, but I affirm my right not to have that freedom end in assaulting me or another person!

The importance of this boundary became horrifyingly relevant this past week as headlines broke about pipe bombs being mailed to various perceived opponents to our current president—and as we learned of a mass shooting in a Jewish sanctuary during a sacred rite of passage.

But at the level of philosophical debate, whenever liberals start to draw healthy boundaries, someone will often accuse liberals of being hypocrites—or Liberal Fundamentalists—for being “tolerant of everything except intolerance.” The best touchstone I have found for articulating why that is not the case is from the late philosopher, Karl Popper (1902 - 1994). In 1945, the year World War II ended, Popper wrote an important book called **The Open Society and Its Enemies**. One of the most significant parts of that book is a passage about what he called the “**paradox of tolerance**.” This paragraph has deep echoes to our own time, especially after this past week:

If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. In this formulation, I do not imply, for instance, that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be unwise. But we should claim the right to suppress them if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of their fists or pistols. We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. We should claim that any movement preaching intolerance places itself outside the law, and we should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal, in the same way as we should consider incitement to murder, or to kidnapping, or to the revival of the slave trade, as criminal. (Vol. 1, Notes to the Chapters: Ch. 7, Note 4)

Taking into account Popper's perspective, I am, on one hand, eager to support non-violent activism that tries to accomplish these goals. On the other hand, it is vital to reject false equivalencies that seek to call liberals hypocrites or "liberal fundamentalists" when they are simply defending the minimal boundaries needed to maintain an open, civil society.

Now, having spent some time exploring what Liberal Fundamentalism is not, I want to be sure to bring in one other important book by Rev. Fred Muir that Steve reminded me about in his description of his Auction Sermon topic of "Beware Liberal Fundamentalism."

Last year, Muir retired after serving as the minister of Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis for 34 years, and two years ago, he edited a collection of essays titled Turning Point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism. His two contributions to that anthology were titled "On the Trinity of Errors: The **iChurch** Revealed" and "On the

Trinity of Promises: The Promises of Unitarian Universalism.” I spent a lot of time reflecting on his perspective a few years ago when he presented the first version of these essays, and I appreciate Steve inviting us to reflect on these perspectives anew. I’ll start with Muir’s critique, then move to his call for a better way.

After being immersed in Unitarian Universalism for decades, Muir has identified three examples of what could be called “Liberal Fundamentalism”—three ways in which extreme forms of our highest values can get perverted and become stumbling blocks.

He writes:

1. We are being held back and stymied — really, we are being held captive — by a persistent, pervasive, disturbing and disruptive commitment to individualism that misguides our ability to engage the changing times;
2. We cling to a Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism that is often insulting to others and undermines our good news;
3. We refuse to acknowledge and treat our allergy to authority and power, though all the symptoms compromise a healthy future.

What I understand him to be saying first is to beware of the ways that the individual freedom at the core of our value system can inhibit us from joining together to act for peace and justice—as we need to do now more than ever.

Second, Fred has also given decades of his life to Unitarian Universalism, so it is from a place of deep love that he takes the risk of naming another form of fundamentalism that can cause UUs to sometimes act as if our way is the best way. Now, to name the obvious, I wouldn’t be standing before you today as a UU minister if I did not have a strong commitment to the value of Unitarian Universalism, but I appreciate his warning about the ways that can devolve into a UU exceptionalism that is a turn off to others who are not UU. We represent a very good way of building religious community, but we are not the only or best way—and claiming to be exceptional can inhibit us from build the partnerships with other religious groups that again are needed now more than ever to build the world we dream about.

Third, Muir names that our liberal commitment to individual liberty can also devolve into what he calls an ”allergy to authority and power.” Certainly we have many

inspiring examples from our history in which that anti-authoritarian instinct has served us well in resisting corruption and injustice. But he is also inviting us to notice the ways that same instinct can undermine our efforts to build healthy communities and institutions. Along these lines, I sometimes joke that we are not an anarchist collective—not that there is anything wrong with being an anarchist collective!

So all that is the bad news: the ways that what we rightly take pride in can, if taken to an extreme, begin to resemble that which we set out against. So what's the good news? For Muir, the good news is that the freedom and liberty at the heart of our liberal tradition does not have to merely be freedom *from* various constrictions; it can also be freedom *for* various commitments. As the saying goes, **“Have you been set free or have you been cast adrift?”** So what would it look like to use our freedom to turn our dreams into deeds?

For Muir, the “Trinity of Promises” looks like a shift:

- *from* isolated individualism *to* a freely chosen interdependence with a community of people who can amplify your values,
- *from* an arrogant exceptionalism (that we're the best and other people should come to us) *to* a generosity of spirit that moves outside the walls of one's community to serve others and the world.
- *from* a reflexive allergy to authority *to* a creative, imaginative openness to the value of various different forms of leadership and governance based on the needs of the project, community, and organization. Sometimes this structure will include hierarchy. Other times, it may be more of a flat, networked, non-hierarchical structure.

The point is to freely choose to live into the full promise of who we can be at our best as UUs.

In conversation with Steve about this topic of “Liberal Fundamentalism,” I was also reminded of a story I know many of you read and were moved by, published a few years ago in [The Washington Post about Derek Black](#). Black is the only child of the founder of the Internet's largest racist hate group site and the godson of David Duke, a former KKK grand wizard (Saslow 1). In theory, one could make a good case in advance that, given his background, Derek Black was destined to be a hopeless racist the rest of his life and was not worth anyone's time. But in studying the story of his

conversion to a more open-minded worldview, it's clear that at least two major dynamics —forces both of exclusion and inclusion— caused him to change his mind.

Part of what caused him to consider changing was the cost of being *excluded*. The racist views he had learned at home resulted in a social ostracism in college. So exclusion was an important factor; but if he had only experienced exclusion, he likely would have become even more entrenched in his bigotry. However, college also presented him with important tastes of *inclusion* that gave him a glimpse of a different way of being in the world. He experienced firsthand that the racial minorities he had been taught to hate were in person nothing like what he had been told growing up. In particular (and this part is especially devastating after yesterday's mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue) his heart was opened by Jewish students at his college inviting him—a famous White Supremacist—to join them at Shabbat dinners (Saslow 210). Importantly they were only willing to risk that invitation once they had seen that as repugnant as Black's racist views were that he did not have any record or inclination of physical violence. This story reminds me of the four practices we learned from Dr. Brené Brown a few weeks ago: "(1) People are hard to hate close up. Move in. (2) Speak truth to bullshit. Be civil. (3) Hold Hands. With strangers. (4) Strong back. Soft front. Wild heart."

For now, I will conclude by inviting you to hear one of my favorite poems that always challenges me to open back up and search for creative possibilities if I find myself hardening into a position of rigid fundamentalism: "[The Place Where We Are Right](#)" by Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000). Amichai is widely considered Israel's greatest modern poet, and this poem is written out of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the Spring.
The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.
But doubts and loves
dig up the world

like a mole, a plough.

And a whisper will be heard in the place

where the ruined

house once stood.