

Before I begin, I'd like say that my goal in speaking on the topic of the personal and the political comes from a place of curiosity and in the spirit of mutual inquiry.

Although my social location – straight, white, male, and a minister – is traditionally one of privilege and authority, I don't claim to have answers, only one perspective out of the many in this room.

To what degree that location biases my perception and my perspective, I leave up to you. Being good Unitarian Universalists, I'm sure none of you will take my words as gospel simply because of where I stand.

Or at least I hope not.

And sometimes when I start out reading and writing for a sermon, I end up in place I didn't expect. This is one of those times.

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Politics don't exist in a bubble. Politics, the policies born from it and the ideals it exposes are deeply intertwined with everything in our lives. It is impossible to separate ourselves from politics and its consequences.

The reality is that politics are very personal. Who we support politically reveals what we value and how we think. Do you value individualism or collectivism? Is healthcare a right or a privilege? Should refugees be denied entry to America or welcomed? Ban guns or more guns?

The list of questions goes on. But most of them are framed as binaries – either, or. Yes or no. And we have to wonder.. Where did the nuance go? Why did we end up with these "choices"?

Can I think that individualism is good in some cases, and collectivism is better in others? Can some refugees be welcomed and others denied entry?

How did we end up here, in this place of such polarization and deadlock? How did everything get so politicized?

There isn't anything wrong with living a political life, Sonny Bunch argued in The Washington Free Beacon in 2013. *"Politics is important; political decisions have consequences; and passionately arguing for your preferred political outcomes is nothing to be ashamed of,"* he wrote. *"A politicized life is a different beast, however. It treats politics as a zero-sum game or a form of total warfare in which the other side must be obliterated. It alters every aspect of your being: where you shop; what you watch on TV; what sort of music you listen to; who you*

associate with. If you're not with the politicized being, you're against him -- and if you're against him, he is well within his rights to ruin you personally and economically. You, the political other, are a leper to be shunned."

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To one degree or another, many of us remember the political and social ferment of the nineteen sixties. The civil rights movement. The anti-war movement. The rise of the New Left. The sexual revolution. The political awakening of whole kinds and classes of people. Black power and the Black Panthers. La Raza and La Causa. The Grey Panthers. Second-wave feminism. Environmentalism. Gay liberation. The drugs. The music.

It was popularly called the counter-culture, and the drugs and music got a lot of attention. The drugs and music have more or less faded into history, but the social and political conflicts it started are still being played out today.

One of the most influential concepts on the left came out of the feminist movement. Carol Hanisch, a member of New York Radical Women and a prominent figure in the Women's Liberation Movement, drafted an article defending the political importance of women's consciousness-raising groups in February 1969 in Gainesville, Florida.

She challenged the idea that sex, appearance, abortion, childcare, and the division of household labor were merely personal issues without political importance. To confront these and other issues, she urged women to overcome self-blame, discuss their situations amongst each other, and organize collectively against male domination of society.

In her essay, she wrote: *One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.*

This opened up what were considered "private" or "social" matters to political analysis and discussion.

And it reveals the systematic nature of oppression. As summarized by Heidi Hartmann, *"Women's discontent, radical feminists argued, is not the neurotic lament of the maladjusted, but a response to a social structure in which women are systematically dominated, exploited, and oppressed."*

More broadly, as civil rights activist and critical race scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw observes: *"This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as*

isolated and individual has also characterized the identity politics of African Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others."

This critical understanding of the systemic nature of many forms of oppression is one of the most enduring analytical legacies of that era.

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Following on Carol Hanisch's insight, Paula Rust argued that, *"one should make personal choices that are consistent with one's personal politics; personal life and personal politics are indistinguishable."*

And that's when things got problematic, because there are real dangers in politicizing the private sphere - the arena of personal choice and individual freedom. And there remains the very real danger of thinking that our personal choices can actually change anything.

But despite these critiques, the various liberation movements picked this up and ran with it. And in doing so, the private/public boundary disintegrated. The distinction between ethics ("ought" in the personal realm) and politics ("ought" in the public realm) collapsed.

It can be argued that this erasing of boundaries caused the tribal polarization that has plagued our political process since.

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Let's go back to the 1960's for a moment and talk about the counterculture. The other counterculture.

Several observers have made note of the fact that after the rational, systemic, post-WWII social consensus started to break down in the 1950's, two different countercultures emerged as alternatives. One has been called the Aquarians, and I described it earlier. The other - what some have called a counter-counterculture - emerged from the unification of the political right with Evangelical Christianity.

Both countercultures offered a new, alternative, universalist, absolutist, anti-rational system.

They explicitly rejected rationality, which had been a foundation of the previous order. Rationality had failed them. Rationality was the cause of all the evils of the Twentieth Century: the World Wars, loss of Christian faith, rampant materialism, ecological devastation, abortion, nuclear weapons, the oppressive state, the breakdown of the social order.

They were absolutist, taking the stance that sees the meaning of everything measured against a fixed external principle, such as God or a Cosmic Plan or a political theory like Marxism.

They were universalist – making the claim that what is right, is right for everyone, everywhere, eternally. Both proposed universalist alternatives to the post-war order. The Aquarians said that everyone should question authority, do what feels good, and study war no more. The Evangelicals said that everyone should obey authority, save it for marriage, and pledge allegiance to the flag.

That's a gross generalization, but it holds a kernel of truth, that these conflicting cultural visions were mirror images of each other. The idea that “one should make personal choices that are consistent with one's personal politics; personal life and personal politics are indistinguishable.” - was applied just as easily by the Evangelicals to their politics.

It's important to note that these were essentially spiritual movements that ended up being absorbed into the two parties of the American political system.

These countercultures redefined the American “left” and “right” political positions from policy stances to “values” ideologies. The Democratic and Republican Parties repositioned themselves as champions of opposing cultural values. Politics shifted from arguments about pragmatic policy questions to tribal battles and virtue signaling. This has polarized American politics in such a way that it may not be resolvable.

We are deadlocked. Politics is supposed to be the way to deal with vast problems and impending catastrophes. It is totally dysfunctional and not working. It's become the problem, not the solution.

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Earlier I asked: Where did the nuance go? Why did we end up with these political “choices”? How did we arrive at this impasse?

Sometimes we need to take a step back, move sideways, and take a look from a different perspective.

The universalism of the countercultures was their fatal flaw. No single system of meaning can work for everyone—or even for most people. Both countercultural visions have failed to appeal to a majority. People are complex, and they make complex choices about who they are and what they do. They blur lines and boundaries, and most have opted out of the culture war, even as it wreaks havoc around them.

The culture war blocks sensible solutions to urgent and important social, economic, and practical problems.

Why does it persist?

Here's where I had to bite the bullet, and listen to the next generation. I ran across this commentary from a Gen X'er, and it really caused me to take another look at my beliefs.

David Chapman writes:

The culture war persists largely because most Baby Boomers do not understand why their countercultures failed. Although the countercultures have been over for a quarter century, participants on both sides do not accept this obvious fact, and are unwilling to draw any conclusions from it.

Many participants still have a wistful certainty that someday, somehow, the glorious counterculture of their youth will rise again, and its eternal truth and justice will triumphantly replace the corrupt mainstream. They maintain a rosy nostalgia for the hippie or Reagan eras. They cherish salvation fantasies for the future "after the Revolution," or "when we take back America." This is entirely unrealistic, on both sides.

Both sides resent the other as the apparent explanation for their own counterculture's failure. I suspect one reason the culture war has heated up dramatically in the past few years is that Baby Boomers realize they will pass out of public life over the next decade, and now is their last chance to impose their values on everyone else. It's the final, desperate push before their time runs out. Realizing that victory is unlikely within their lifetime accounts for some of bitterness of the war.

This is a fascinating insight. I take it to heart. The generation governing this country is the Boomers, and many are still fighting the battles of their youth, trying to impose their values and vision on the whole country. Many of whom don't seem to want either sides version, and have grown disgusted with the dysfunction and the righteousness and the hypocrisy of the parties.

And the reality is there hasn't been a mainstream for decades. America is a balkanized patchwork of subcultures and economic, social, ethnic, and regional interests.

Any "victory" by either side is apt to be temporary and ignored. Although the Evangelical Right is on track to gain more power and impose their values through law, that won't last... the Aquarian cultural practices are too widespread, Americans are too diverse, and too fractious.

And as everyone knows, the multicultural, multiracial, multifaith future is coming, and that will be way more complicated than anyone expects, on either side of the divide.

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I think a real and very pressing question is not what side are you on or who wins, but how do we stop this fruitless culture war and move ahead?

Because the culture war is a zero-sum game. Because nothing is going to get done until the war is over. Until one side “wins”, or more likely, there is nothing left to fight over but the wreckage of a country.

Or.. what? Are there alternatives? Or are we locked in combat like a pair of stags, who get their horns tangled up and die of starvation, unable to disengage?

Imagine what it would be like to just stop being so partisan. To de-politicize. To relax and de-escalate. To restore some reasonable boundaries between the personal and political.

Now, if politics – power- was my main game, I might not be interested in this. Too many interests benefit from this war, and don’t care about the results, only their personal and political gain.

But it isn’t my interest. I have this seemingly radical idea that as a people of faith, as religious people, our main job is to stop the war before more beings get hurt.

And because there is much more pressing business to attend to.

I don’t even know if it’s possible to end this war, but I have a sneaking suspicion that whoever stops it will end up having the most influence in the future.

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Anyway, that’s where I ended up at this time. It raises a lot of questions for me as a UU. I’m curious to hear what you think.