

Congress and Congregations
January 6, 2019
Hopedale Unitarian Parish - Hopedale, MA

This week the popular writer John Pavlovitz posted an essay to his blog titled "The Extinction of the White Male Dinosaur." He noted that as the 116th Congress was sworn in this week, it is the most diverse Congress in our history. Congress looks more like the America we actually live in than at any time in history - and yet there is still a long way to go so that white, Christian males aren't the overwhelming majority.

NPR did a story this week on the Pew Research Center's report on the religious affiliation of the new Congress. Falling more than 2%, Congress is now only 88% Christian. This makes Congress much more Christian than the country where Christians are only 70% of the population. It's a start. The same NPR story noted there are TWO Unitarian Universalists. One is Amerish Babulal of the 7th California district who is now in his third term and the other is Judy Chu, the first Chinese American woman ever elected who is in her 6th term in CA's 27th district. Catholics have the most at 163 or 30% and the second largest group is general non denominational Christians who number 80 or 15%. There are also 72 Baptists, 42 Methodists, 26 each of Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans, 10 Mormons, and 4 Congregationalists and 0 Quakers. This Congress has the most non-Christians ever at 63. 63 non Christians are only 12% however and non Christians make up around 30% of the general population. The non Christians in Congress include 32 Jews, 3 Hindus, 3 Muslims, 2 Buddhists, only 1 Unaffiliated person, that being Senator Kyrsten Sinema of AZ. The religiously unaffiliated make up about a 25% of the entire adult US population, but there's only 1 in Congress or 2/10 of one percent.

We also know there a record number of women but still that counts for only 25% (and 51% of the population). There are a record number of racial minorities and openly Queer members but those numbers too fall far short of the percentage of minorities and LGBTQ people in our country. The best we've ever done still leaves us a long, long way to go.

In his essay Pavlovitz notes that the White Male Dinosaur is not going quietly into that good night of history's scrap heap. Quite the contrary, the dinosaurs are raging against the light and are going to fight, kick, and scream all the way to their death bed. This will probably mean our politics gets uglier before our country gets better, but the numbers aren't going to change. We are headed toward a diverse beloved community.

Five years ago I wrote a similar blog post about this called The Last Stand of the Angry, Old, White, Straight, Christian Men. I noted that demographically their time is coming to an end and they sense it and it makes them dangerous, like a cornered wild animal. A cornered wild animal is going to lose, but can still be very dangerous, just watch a YouTube video of animal control officers trying to capture trapped alligators, mountain lions, bears, or even raccoons.

<https://sunflowerchalice.com/2013/07/14/the-last-stand-of-old-white-angry-christian-men/>

I'm going to guess that you join me in happily cheering the most diverse U.S. Congress EVER. It's another decided step-forward toward creating the country we dream about. This long march toward beloved community has so far required a revolution to split from England, an extermination of the indigenous inhabitant of the continent, a Civil War to end Slavery, and an ongoing Civil Rights struggle against the white supremacist history of Jim Crow and Mass Incarceration, as well as ongoing battles for equality for women, queer people, immigrants, and religious minorities. It hasn't been easy. Some of this history is ugly, so ugly we don't want to admit to it or to its full impact on not only how we live but how we perceive our reality. And yet, we seem to march forward inch by inch and maybe, just maybe this new Congress is a two inch step. And yet, we still have so far to go to realize the world we dream about.

Our new members of congress, dancing their way into their offices, are going to run into that lesson we all learn over and over - Creating the world we want, creating the life we want happens in fits and starts. Even for those who seem to have it all and for those whom seemed to have walked right into all their dreams coming true there is a history of fits and starts, fears and anxieties, failures and learning from them, and just plain old dumb mistakes to go along with the progress and the insight and the better understanding.

The core reason our country is so conflicted right now is that older rich white straight Christian men (and the women who support them) are, for the first time in our history, having to deal with the fact that their days of a privileged position, their days of being more immune to life's difficulties than others are going to end, and sooner rather than later. They are scared to death. Are they scared of this change itself - partly, BUT they are more scared of what they will lose. They will lose their compass, the way they were taught to navigate the world used one map and now the map is being switched out for a new GPS system that talks back to them. Actual progress for the country means actual real and painful losses for the rich, old, white men.

And yet it has to be. We no longer live in the old dispensation, we live in a world where fairness, justice, and equality are freedoms and rights that have been tasted and imagined by everyone on the planet and they can't be unimagined or untasted. We live in a world where it is no longer accepted but ignorant to believe one group, one gender, one color, one religion, on language, one sexuality, one gender expression, one historically located and socially constructed location is better than another. We live in a time where the way we've always done it - be it government, or health care, or education, isn't working any more. We live in a time where if we don't apply what we've learned from science about how our planetary ecosystem works, we will actually in all reality KILL our planet and we will all die. If we step back, what sane rich, white old man wouldn't want to bury his head and sand and ignore all this?

When people are scared, especially when they are scared of losing their way, losing their power, losing their feeling of control, losing their feeling of safety, they will say and do almost

anything to prevent it or to not have to deal with it. They will blame and scapegoat - all our society's problems stem from others - It's the Jews fault, It's the blacks fault, it's the uppity women's fault, the gays fault, it's the immigrant's fault, it's the Muslims fault. They will rant and rave and not understand why some people don't share their point of view. After all, their perspective is THE correct one. Isn't it obvious that marriage is between one man and one woman? Isn't it obvious women should stay home and take care of children? Women don't need to work or make the same money as a man for doing the same job. America is Obviously a Christian nation where we speak English. The old, white men are throwing a tantrum - if everyone just did it my way, everything would be fine, even great, once again. What's wrong with the way we've always done it? Virtually all of you are imagining the people I'm talking about - Nazis, Deplorables, MAGAs, Conservatives, Rednecks, and so on.

Now stop and think for a minute how this is exactly like so many congregations.

Just like the situation facing our government, education and health care systems, and our social norms and mores - the way we've always done it isn't working any longer at church either. What's wrong with these people who don't value the Lord's Prayer, or who don't like the old hymns, or won't help teach Religious Education? Some of them don't even want to have church on Sunday mornings because it's inconvenient. And just like in the rest of the world there is blaming and scapegoating - things are wrong at church because of everyone in the congregation that doesn't think I do. It's the Religious Education Director's fault. It's the Minister's fault. It's the "new" people's fault. What's wrong with the way we always did things? What do you mean we are not "welcoming?"

And if right now you're thinking, wait a minute, that's not the same thing - let me assure you that it is exactly the same thing. The fear and anxiety of loss associated with changes going on and changes yet to come is the same. And the reactions to it are the same.

Church is the place where we practice being human said James Luther Adams. How can we heal division in the world if we can't heal it in our congregation?

Notice what's happening with this new, diverse Congress - Many of the freshmen class are unafraid to speak of things that were political suicide less than 5 years ago - Socialism, Medicare for All single payer health care, free public college education, guaranteed basic income, increasing taxes on the wealthy, rank choice voting, automatic voter registration, national election days as national holidays. All the people who have traditionally been left out are organizing, working hard, dreaming of what's possible and instead of just complaining about the way things are they are getting involved, getting elected, giving voice to new ideas, new approaches, new attitudes, newpossibilities! What if we did the same in our churches?

Instead of focussing on fear, what if we focus on what's possible? Before anything can happen, someone has to believe it is possible. Hope is built on possibility -that no direction or plan or fate

is ever completely firm and fixed forever - revelation is ongoing is a cornerstone of our Unitarian Universalism - anything can, and eventually everything does, change.

Where possibility runs into its greatest barrier from all things is economics - or two phenomena described in economic theory. The first is something that economists call - for real - The Endowment Effect - People ascribe more value to things because they already own them. This is related to the second - what economists call "Loss Aversion" - most people would rather avoid losing money than acquire more. The psychological impact of losing is thought to be twice as powerful as the pleasure of gaining.

So when we think about the difficulty of moving society or a congregation forward, we deal with very real and very common psychological opposition - People will value what they already have more than anything they might acquire even if what they might acquire might in reality be worth more. And people would rather avoid losing capital - be it actual money or political capital - than gaining more. By a factor of 2 to 1!

So when the old white dinosaurs in Congress can't see the beloved community our society might build it's because they value the society that they already have much more than any new idea and they can't even imagine that a new society might possibly be better and they would rather avoid losing power and privilege than gaining more.

At church, we literally have endowments which we value more than whatever we might possible buy or invest in even it is our own survival. And it's no surprise long time members of a congregation would rather avoid losing things they have known and like at church - be it members or friends or something said or done in worship than acquire more members.

This is why even discussing changes is difficult, we hold on to what we already have and would rather not lose it than gain something better - by a 2 to 1 margin. The power of the fear of loss is immense.

Change isn't something to be feared, it's the playing field of life, of reality. Will we be controlled by change? Will we put so much strength into resisting it that we can't form it and shape it into a more pleasing and accessible shape?

Think for a minute - and It's not rhetorical. Think for minute about the following reflection questions from our Soul Matters resources-

What did your childhood and family of origin teach you about possibility? Are those lessons ones you need to remember or reject?

What are others learning about living and leaning into possibility by watching you?

Is it possible that the thing you want is not the thing you need?

Is it possible that the thing you're sure you're right about is wrong?

Is "That was unfair!" or "I was wronged" keeping you from the possibility of moving on?

Are you sure you're too old to do it?

Are you sure it's too late to try it?

Is there more to see in your "enemy" than what you've been staring at?

Is it possible that your loved one AND your loathed one are doing the best they can? And finally need forgiveness for not living up to who you want them to be?

Does this exercise scare you? Are you scared of what might happen at our congregational conversation after the service today?

Well, creating the life we want for ourselves and the future we want for our church happens in fits (and sometimes they are actual fits - arguments, tantrums, hurts, taking my ball and going home fits) and starts and stops and starting agains and stopping agains and success and failures.

Possibility doesn't come wrapped up in a new year's gift box, just open what you've hoped for and there it is! Possibility requires courage. We must be brave enough to consider the possibilities. We must be brave enough to give up certainty and assume an emotional as well as an intellectual posture of curiosity. We must be brave enough to give up some of our personal preferences for the good of the group, trusting that others will too. Possibility requires trusting that there are enough resources within us and within our community and our congregation and the world around us to justify hope and optimism and this is optimism is another cornerstone of our faith.

Considering possibilities doesn't have to be fearful, it can be hopeful. The way it's always been is safe, but limiting - we may need ideas, practices, customs, and programs that are brand new to all of us. But instead of thinking of this as too risky to chance, how does our attitude change if we think of this as too risky NOT to chance.

Possibility unleashes creativity. Possibility unleashes energy. Possibility and creative energy are attractive. Possibility unshackles us from the way we've always done it so we can create together the way we need to do it from now on. Possibility enables us to not only move forward but create a future even more glorious and storied than our past.