Mindful Politics

by Rev. Don Garrett

presented at The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

November 1, 2015

Well, it's that time of year again! Is everyone enjoying the political theater we've been provided lately? I guess it's a little like sports. We each have our favorite teams and everything they do is great, or should be great; and then there are all those other teams that other people seem to like for reasons that often appear somehow mysterious to us.

But as we watch the spectacle, some elements of political advocacy seem to rise to the surface and even become obvious from time to time. One basic formula was articulated by Shakespeare over 400 years ago. He asks it as a question: "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take up arms against a sea of troubles and thus, by opposing, end them?"

This gives us a basic orientation. Something is wrong, hurting us or someone else, and at some point we've had enough and it's time to do something about it. This was effectively demonstrated by Peter Finch's character in the movie, *Network,* when he tells his audience, "I want you to get up right now, sit up, go to your windows, open them and stick your head out and yell, 'I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!' "

Kind of sounds like our political debates, doesn't it? And there is a pattern here: identify an issue, create concern and a feeling of urgency, leading people to act.

You can see this in every issue on the right of the political spectrum. There are those insisting that hispanic immigrants are destroying our country, urging plans to block the border and send them all back south.

And this is the way the abortion issue is often framed, too. Calling abortion murder immediately elevates it to the level of a grusome crisis that must be stopped by any means.

And just take a look at the arguments against gun control. They start by framing the issue as one of safety and security. The say that there are dangerous people out there, violent people who want to rob us, hurt us, rape us, kill us, and that the only way for Americans to be safe is to arm everyone – they say, "The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."

Even something as widely accepted among developed nations as universal health care can be demonized through this kind of discourse. We get accusations of government "death panels" deciding who gets treatment and who doesn't. Costs would spiral, flexibility and choice would disappear, jobs would be lost, and patient confidentiality would be compromised once the government has a file on everyone's health records. Claiming that there would be a crisis doesn't necessarily mean there will be one, but that's not the point. Convincing people that a crisis is imminent is the key to political advocacy in our culture.

And then there's the overriding issue of distrust of the government itself! Once the government has been successfully demonized, all sorts of fearful and paranoid claims can be justified simply by asssuming out that our system is corrupt.

This formula can even be used to create issues where there are no real issues, like voter ID laws enacted to prevent non-existent voter fraud, but which actually target racial minorities and the elderly, limiting their access to the polls.

But the right doesn't have exclusive ownership of this kind of discourse. Since this formula is the universal standard in our culture, it's no less ubiquitous on the left.

Just take a look at our arguments about the dangers of unchecked climate change. They are rooted in alarmist end-of-the-world assumptions of impending crisis and disaster, intended to create the urgency to act.

The left's arguments in favor of universal health care are framed in much the same way, as are advocacies in the areas of pollution, education, equal rights issues, and more.

But this is nothing new. All sides of the arguments dominating America's political landscape are using the tools defined, refined, and handed down to us by that amazing sage of ancient Greece, Aristotle. Aristotle's book, *A Treatise on Rhetoric,* sets the standards that have been followed for millennia.

First, it defines "rhetoric," as the ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion. It describes four distinct steps in the process. The first is, of course, identifying a problem. The second is to create a sense of urgency about the problem. And once the sense of urgency is present, the next step is to offer a solution which would releave the discomfort of the urgency. The final step is urging the listeners to act by accepting and participating in the solution to the problem.

You see, Aristotle recognized that persuasion involved a great deal more than just basic logic, though. His chapters 2-11 address the issue of efficacious emotions for speakers. He describes how to arouse certain emotions in an audience in order to produce the desired action. He describes pairs of emotions, such as anger and calmness or friendliness and hostility, pointing out that it is helpful to understand all the emotions in one's listeners in order to be able to stimulate the emotional response you desire.

It's amazing how little understood this is by the public in general. Study of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is usually reserved for philosophy students or political operatives, so we don't usually get a look into the kitchen where the sausage of public debate is prepared. But once we do, it's obvious that everyone is playing the same game. The only difference is the direction of the advocacy, not the form.

And what does this form of advocacy give us? It gives us a noisy, contentious debate, full of deprecation and hostility, as everyone tries to damage their

opposition. These debates both generate and feed on fear, stoking listeners' anxieties in hope of recruiting them into their positions.

Now we can see why our political theater is so troublesome and distressing to us. It's exhausting to hear, and ultimately numbing. People often take a side just so they won't have to listen any more. And almost half of all Americans have decided to tune it all out and give up on voting entirely.

And so what does this all give us? It gives us the culture we have, an uncivil culture of divisive hostility. Is it any wonder that some vulnerable and impressionable individuals among us would incorporate this style into their lives so fully that they can delight in murder and mayhem? It's a natural outcome.

Which brings me to the question as to whether there might be another way to engage societal change. We might begin with a re-examination of Shakespeare's famous question, "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take up arms against a sea of troubles and thus, by opposing, end them?"

I would like to suggest that we have been hoodwinked into accepting a false dichotomy here. Shakespeare gives us only two choices: suffer or fight. But an examination of the lives and works of history's most influential change agents reveals that they refused to accept this false choice between suffering or fighting.

In the early twentieth century, Mohandas Gandhi worked tirelessly to overthrow the English rule of his native India. He was not alone in wanting freedom from the English, but his approach was radically different. Most people in India assumed that the only way to overthrow the British was through armed resistance, revolt and revolution. But Gandhi had a different idea. He advocated non-cooperation, non-violence and peaceful resistance rather than violence. He refused to demonize the British, insisting that all people shared in a universal humanity. He said that, "My ambition is no less than to convert the British people through non-violence and thus make them see the wrong they have done to India."

Rather than confronting the British as perpetrators of evil, Gandhi appealed to their better judgment through an increased understanding and appreciation of the lives of those they had oppressed.

Another person who refused to follow the conventional rules of confrontational debate was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Influenced by Gandhi, he brought a different kind of leadership to the American civil rights movement. It was deeply religious in style, based on a commitment to universal love and respect for all people, wherever they were along the lines of the racial divide. He belived that racists suffered from the consequences of their acquiescence to segregation's evils and that they deserved understanding and compassion far more than any kind of violent opposition.

He said, that "Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts. Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial and moral questions of our time. We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love." and he said, "Love is the only force capable of turning an enemy into a friend." King's deeply compassionate leadership made the American civil rights movement into something that it had not been before and has not really been since. He made it an ethical religious issue with political implications. And the movement under King's leadership was successful in ways that it had not been before and has not been since.

America owes King a deep debt of gratitude, as India does to Gandhi. I believe that we could best honor that debt by following the example of these two most effective change agents of the twentieth century by refusing to demonize our opponents and act faithfully on our belief that all are equally deserving of our respect and compassion, whether we agree with them or not.

We can look further than the examples set by these two great men, though. There are religious leaders in our midst who have taken up the challenge of creating non-Aristotelian styles of advocacy. Their essays are collected in a book entitled,

Mindful Politics. There's a picture of a campaign button on the front that says, "It's the ego, stupid!"

The Dalai Lama begins his essay by pointing out that religion is often misunderstood, as people take its metaphors as literal truth rather than their actual intent. He says that all religions promote "similar ideals of love, the same goal of benefitting humanity through spiritual practice, and the same effect of making its followers into better human beings. . . The common goal of all moral precepts laid down by the great teachers of humanity is unselfishness. . . ."

He continues, "All religions agree upon the necessity to control the undisciplined mind that harbors selfishness and other roots of trouble, and each teaches a path leading to a spiritual state that is peaceful, disciplined, ethical, and wise."

He also points out that our focus on material and economic development often misses the point, since this emphasis is based on an often unexamined belief that mental suffering exists as the result of physical circumstances rather than having its own independent causes and conditions.

The Dalai Lama's argument is in harmony with our November worship theme: humility. (I'm so proud to be humble.) True humility isn't a rejection of our self-worth, as some believe. True humility results from overcoming our self-centeredness, making it possible to realize that the happiness of others is as important as our own. He says that once we recognize that all beings cherish happiness and do not want suffering, "It then becomes both morally wrong and pragmatically unwise to pursue only one's own happiness oblivious to the feelings and aspirations of all others who surround us as members of the same human family."

He points out that, "Whether one believes in religion or not there is no one who does not appreciate love and compassion. Right from the moment of our birth, he says, we are under the care and kindness of our parents; later in life when facing

the sufferings of disease and old age, we are again dependent on the kindness of others. If at the beginning and end of our lives we depend upon others' kindness, why then in the middle should we not act kindly towards others?"

He says that, "The development of a kind heart (a feeling of closeness for all human beings) does not involve the religiosity we normally associate with conventional religious practice. It is not only for people who believe in religion, but for everyone who considers himself or herself, above all, a member of the human family. . . This is a powerful feeling that we should develop and apply. . . ."

David Loy has an essay in *Mindful Politics,* entitled, "Wego: The Social Roots of Suffering." He points out that the Buddhist idea of suffering is often misunderstood. He says that "The fact that we find life dissatisfactory, one damned problem after another, is not accidental or coincidental. It is the very nature of the unawakened mind to be bothered about something, because at the core of our being there is a free-floating anxiety that has no particular object but can be plugged into any problematic situation."

Loy explains that, "Our basic frustration is due most of all to the fact that our sense of being a separate self, set apart from the world we are in, is an illusion. Another way to express this is that the ego-self is ungrounded, and we experience this ungroundedness as an uncomfortable emptiness or hole at the very core of our being. We feel this problem as a sense of *lack,* of inadequacy, of unreality, and in compensation we usually spend our lives trying to accomplish things that we think will make us more real."

He continues, "But what does this have to do with social challenges? Doesn't it imply that social problems are just projections of our dissatisfaction? Unfortunately, it's not that simple. Being social beings, we tend to group our sense of lack, even as we strive to compensate by creating collective senses of self.

"In fact, many of our social problems can be traced back to this deluded sense of collective self, this "wego," or group ego. It can be defined as one's own race, class,

gender, nation, religion, or some combination thereof. In each case, a collective identity is created by discriminating one's own group from another. As in the personal ego, the "inside" is opposed to the other "outside," and this makes conflict inevitable, not just because of competition with other groups, but because the socially constructed nature of group identity means that one's own group can never feel secure enough."

In his memoir, *At Hell's Gate: A Soldier's Journey from War to Peace,* Claude Anshin Thomas wrote that, "I cannot think myself into a new way of living, I have to live myself into a new way of thinking." He sums it up, beautifully, saying, "Peace is not an idea. Peace is not a political movement, not a theory or a dogma. Peace is a way of life: living mindfully in the present moment. . . . It is not a question of politics, but of actions. It is not a matter of improving a political system or even taking care of homeless people alone. These are valuable but will not alone end war and suffering. We must simply stop the endless wars that rage within. . . . Imagine, if everyone stopped the war in themselves – there would be no seeds from which war could grow."

The great religions of the world all support the unmasking of Shakespeare's false dichotomy and invite us to stop relying on the manufacture of artificially created rhetorical crises. Can you imagine how different our political culture could be if we actually heeded the words of Dr. King when he called for us evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation, the foundation of which is love?

As Lao Tzu said, "There must be peace in the heart."

May it be so.