

If It Were Up to Me
by Scott J. Rubin at UUCSV, Northumberland, PA
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A lot of you have started coming here in the past few years, and you're probably wondering what I'm doing up here. First, rest assured – I will NOT be talking about money.

Back in the day – back when UUCSV was just starting out – we had part-time ministers. At first, it was just one Sunday a month. Then we grew and we could afford a minister two Sundays a month for about 9 months of the year. That still left a lot of Sundays without a minister.

Back then, the worship committee wasn't so much about policy and planning, it was about making sure there was a service and a sermon every week – with or without a minister. We took turns chairing the committee, we read sermons that other ministers wrote, and as we gained confidence we started writing our own sermons. Lenore Askew, Jean Lumpkin, and I – and several others – developed our own quasi-liturgical styles. It was fun, interesting, and a little scary.

The idea, which is reflected in our reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians – and which is so basic to Unitarian Universalism – is that we are all given different gifts, different talents, different insights. How boring it would be if we were all the same, all thought the same, all held the same beliefs. No, Paul didn't say that, but that's the logical extension of his message.

So why not share our diversity from the pulpit?

I went back and checked. I wrote about 30 sermons between 1992 and 2002. It's been a few years since my last one, so I guess I've had a lot of time to think about this one, so here goes.

Every now and then, especially when the kids were growing up, I'll start a conversation with "if it were up to me ..." Sometimes it's just a random idea. Sometimes I'm trying to be thought-provoking, or to play devil's advocate, or just trying to get the kids to wake up or think on their feet or learn to express themselves or form an argument.

Have you been wondering how to start a conversation with your teenager? Try this: If it were up to me, kids wouldn't be able to drive until they graduate from high school.

I really did that – and I had some great reasons. Teens wouldn't have to work to afford a car, so they'd be more involved in after-school activities. You wouldn't have kids dying and getting seriously injured in car crashes every year. It would encourage marginal students to stay in school, and it would force schools to provide better programs for kids they lose now.

So the boys would be forced to think on their feet and explain why their father was crazy. Lucky for them, that's usually not too hard to do.

But sometimes my "if it were up to me" thoughts aren't just a conversation starter. From time to time, I get more serious about wishing things were different.

Presidential election years usually bring this out in me, and this year is no exception. To Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, indeed to most of us, foreign policy is an abstract concept, a calculus, a multi-dimensional chess game with rules that change and dozens of players. Hillary and Barack try to convince us that they can play this game better, smarter, and with more skill than our current president has. Okay, that's probably not a hard point to win.

But if it were up to me, we would all listen carefully and learn from John McCain. It's not that I necessarily agree with him, but we need to understand what he's been through – really understand – and learn from it. Evil and terror are not abstract concepts to Senator McCain. He lived with evil for five years. He was tortured, terrorized, abused in ways we can't imagine.

Whether we agree or disagree with his politics, we need to listen and learn. He knows that America has enemies. He knows that some of them are truly evil. He knows they play by a different set of rules, are governed by a different moral code. He knows this, quite literally, in his bones.

I think that's why there is such a connection between Joe Lieberman and John McCain. Lieberman, like my parents and so many other Jewish people of his generation, is a child of the Holocaust. They grew up with the memory of aunts and uncles and cousins who they would never meet or never see again.

They are the children who escaped, the survivors. The children that parents sent away to keep safe. The children who were born in America to the entrepreneurial ones, the risk takers, who came to America first – and whose brothers and sisters were supposed to come later. The brothers and sisters whose last journey was on a train to Auschwitz instead of on a ship to America.

They know beyond any doubt that there is evil in the world – evil that we can't even fathom, evil that demands a response. Preemptive war against a genocidal maniac is not an abstract concept to them. It is not something to be debated. If only someone had had the nerve to strike preemptively against the Third Reich.

I don't know where I come out on all this. I don't have the answers. But if it were up to me, we'd listen and learn.

And in case you're trying to figure out my politics, we should really listen to Barack and Hillary too.

Racial prejudice and hatred are not abstractions to Senator Obama. He knows them, he's lived them, he has a deep and intimate understanding of them. To him, we shall overcome is not a song or a symbol or even a wish. It's a statement of fact. We should listen and learn when he paints his vision of what America could be – an America where there are no longer more black men in prison than in college. An America where people don't avoid you, or police don't stop you, because of your skin color. An America that respects other cultures and religions – not just tolerance, but respect and admiration. An America that has the confidence and humility not to tell other countries what to do.

Senator Clinton can teach us quite a bit too, if we would only listen. She has a different life story. She understands what it means to be a woman in America – to be the smartest person in the room, but to not be taken seriously. To be a natural leader who no one pays attention to. To sacrifice your career so your husband can advance his. To be a professional woman who is expected to be the one who takes off work when the kid is sick, to go to the PTA meetings and teacher conferences, to make something for the bake sale. She understands that “having it all” means having to make one compromise after another.

And she knows we can do better. We can provide health care, child care, elder care – to take some of that burden off of working women who are trying to be mother and daughter and wife and co-worker and friend.

If it were up to me, we’d listen to all of them – really listen – and learn. Each has a valid, and very different, point of view. As Paul teaches us, each is part of one body. But no one of them is everything. You can’t be the eyes and the ears and the hands and the feet. You need all the pieces to make a functioning body.

We need the inspiration of Obama, the practicality of Clinton, and the experience of McCain. That might not tell us who to vote for, but it just might help us figure out what we need to do to become better people; to build a stronger community; to live in a safer world. And maybe, some day, they’ll realize they need each other. If it were up to me ...

While I’m at it – if it were up to me, we’d point our moral compass away from the bedroom and toward the boardroom.

Can I be blunt? Can we talk? I don’t care who you love. I don’t care who you sleep with. As long as it’s consensual and non-violent, I don’t care if you pay for it, where you do it, or how many of you are in the room at the same time. It’s none of my business and it tells me very little about you as a person. I don’t choose my friends on that basis, and I certainly won’t choose my political leaders that way. That’s all private.

But I do care about public morality. I care about lying and cheating and misleading the public. I care about corporate executives that steal fortunes from failing companies. I care about CEOs who think it’s perfectly proper for them to make more money in a day than the people actually doing the work make in a year. I care about multi-millionaires who close factories and send thousands of jobs overseas and then try to convince us that it’s good for us. It’s strange, though, that they can’t understand why their sales are dropping.

So, if it were up to me, I’d get government out of the bedroom and into the boardroom.

By the way, if it were up to me, we’d stop caring about where a politician worships or what his or her minister says. Not only do I think that’s irrelevant to their ability to govern, but it’s a matter of self-preservation. Can you imagine if I ever ran for office and they trotted out Barry’s sermons?

But seriously, that nonsense about a few sound bites from hundreds of hours of preaching by Jeremiah Wright is elevating words over actions. Look at what Rev. Wright’s church accomplished – it grew to several thousand members, which gave it the resources to feed and

clothe those in need; educate those who need extra help; serve the community in ways that government failed to do. I don't mind having a president who has experienced the power of what people can accomplish when they join together.

If it were up to me, we would apply these lessons to our lives – every day. Not just during an election year. Not just when we're evaluating political candidates.

We would really listen to, and learn from, our children, our partners, our friends. Not listening with one ear. Not nodding our heads while we're planning dinner, or thinking about that meeting at work, or answering email, or watching American Idol. If it were up to me, we'd turn off the TV, step away from the computer, sit down and really listen. Try to understand, and learn.

“What's new at school” is not a question to be asked in the car, with the radio on, and five other things on your mind. Take the time to listen, understand, and learn.

“How was your day” is not a throw-away to be followed by “what would you like for dinner.” Listen, care, empathize, and learn.

It's hard. It takes a lot of work. But the benefits are immeasurable – we really can learn a lot from each other, if we try.

We also need to recalibrate our moral compasses. And not only about politicians. It's not a problem for the newspapers and the tabloids and People magazine and the “talking heads” on TV. It's our problem. We need to stop caring so much about other people's sex lives, and start caring more about peoples' lives. Do they have enough to eat? Are they staying warm in the winter and cool in the summer? Are they getting the medical care they need?

This is where our faith community comes in. A place where we can join together to listen and learn and respect those who have different experiences, different lives, different loves. A place where we can bring together the eyes and ears and hands and feet. A place where the musicians and writers can inspire the teachers and builders. A place where we can pool our resources and talents to help our community, and to help those who need a hand.

If it were up to me, there would be a religious community based on the justice of Moses, the love of Jesus, the wisdom of Mohammed, the peace of Buddha, and the stewardship of our pagan ancestors.

Sometimes you do get what you wish for. May we continue to make it so.