

**“Coyote and the Election(s)” a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely
October 12, 2008 Unitarian Church of Edmonton**

All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership

- John Kenneth Galbraith.

When I planned this service a few weeks ago, I was expecting to get up and offer a sermon on the shallowness of the election process in both Canada and the United States. I was looking forward to picking apart campaigns and media interpretation and hoping that some deeper sermonic message would emerge as a result of those musings. A lot ministers write some of their sermons that way, with a beginning in mind and a hope that an ending will emerge. It's a good way to go. It allows for the preacher to learn through the process, and I have a lot to learn.

Well, a couple of weeks ago both the elections and my sermon got hijacked by the credit crisis, the financial collapse of the American banking system and the meltdown of the stock markets around the globe. It distracts from my planned topic, even as it seems to bring the US election to a conclusion while making our Canadian election closer than anyone would have guessed. And as I sat down to write, I truly had no idea where this would go. Well, here's what came out...

On Tuesday, I received a pastoral letter to UU ministers written by a former minister from Halifax, Beth Miller, who now leads ministers, and UUA President Bill Sinkford. It originates in the United States where the mortgage and credit crisis is being felt more intensely by ordinary people than those in Canada, but the message still applies. I'd like to quote a bit:

Dear Colleagues,

This is a time of intense anxiety for all of us. How will our faith and leadership guide the people we serve through these tough times? Certainly this is on most of your minds as you write your sermons and newsletter columns... and ... go about ...your ministry as concern ... grows ...

...Financial institutions fall, and headlines trumpet “the worst catastrophe since the Great Depression.” Insecurity and pain abound. We don't know where it will lead, but we're at the beginning of something more significant than any of the other crises we've endured in recent years. The threat of despair may well be among our people and, indeed, among ourselves. How do we confront unequivocally these challenges? We can raise our prophetic voices to rail against the values and policies that brought us here, raise awareness and advocate for change, and promote generosity to alleviate present suffering. The greater challenge, and more crucial need, is to discover our authentic pastoral voices and speak boldly to the experience of these times—the fear and anger, the isolation and loneliness, the hopelessness and despair in the face of some very real losses of personal security and identity. Anxiety reaches into our communities in both predictable and surprising ways. We ourselves may be fearful for our own well-being and that of our families. And yet, we are called to be pastors. Perhaps we can offer a word of comfort and hope. Sometimes it is more important to allow these experiences to be spoken of and heard. Sometimes, as you well know, it is simply our compassionate presence in the face of anguish that is called for. How do we manage all of this with honesty, courage and integrity?

We don't have the answers. We share your confusion and anxiety. We write today to tell you that you are in our thoughts and prayers and to affirm our faith in our Unitarian Universalist congregations as places of love, healing, and support through these tough economic times.

I was deeply moved by that letter. I felt it ministered to me in ways I did not know I needed. In it I also found a reminder that the first job of a minister in these troubled times is not to figure this mess all out on an intellectual level. The first task is to honour the stress and anxiety some of us may be feeling. Stephen Epperson, a colleague in Vancouver reminded his congregation a couple of weeks ago of the great wisdom contained in "A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" by Douglas Adams. In the first pages of the book, Arthur Dent sees the planet earth destroyed in a few seconds to make an hyperspace bypass by a species he did not know existed. Still in his bathrobe with toothbrush and a towel in hand, he is transported to a space ship. He is given the Hitchhiker's Guide with its two word mantra, "Don't Panic!"

It is wise advice. Panic offers little constructive help and as with the stock markets, usually tends to make a bad situation much worse. The headlines are difficult to avoid and are largely written or broadcast to prey on our worst fears. Panic, after all, will keep us watching and reading. The media demands that the candidates tell us what they will do to fix the crisis. It is an absurd question. The challenge is global and has been years, perhaps decades, in the making. No one President or Prime Minister is going to fix it alone with a policy forged on the fly in the middle of an election campaign. Much to my regret, the only candidate in either election who seems willing to suggest that appears to be Mr. Harper.

In the middle of this we are called to choose our next government two days from now. We are asked to pick a leader. I remind you of Galbraith's opening words today, "All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of the people in their time." That's what the pastoral letter is calling our ministers and our communities to do.

Sadly, I have not heard any of the political leadership candidates on either side of the border doing this in a way that has struck me as filled with integrity. I have always longed for a political leader who would be willing to say at the appropriate time, "Well, *that* didn't work. We thought it was a good idea, but we were so wrong, so here's what we'll try next." Or perhaps it would be nice to hear an Opposition leader saying, "The government has a good idea, this time." Right now I would just like to hear any leader say, "Wow, this is bigger than any one party or country. I have faith that it will sort itself out, but it will take years and there will be pain. In the meantime, I will do everything I can to mitigate the pain and try to make the best decisions as the situation unfolds. I can't give you a firm plan right now because everything is up in the air, but I can tell you my priorities will be... etc."

That kind of honesty would probably alleviate many of my fears. It's the strategy Franklin Delano Roosevelt used in his famous fireside radio chats during the Great Depression. Those informal chats echoed the philosophy of his first inaugural address when he said, "...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." They weren't talks about policy, and some of them weren't that good. But they were talks about people and their fears and how to manage those fears. That's what we need now. Yes, we need better policies and better regulations (although our Canadian ones seem pretty good by

comparison with many), but mostly we need a sense that we aren't alone, that someone does care. We want reassurance that we matter.

For most of us there is nothing we can do about this global economic crisis. We are all just passengers on this particular cruise. Now that we've hit the iceberg, we just have to see if the engineers have learned anything from what happened to the Titanic all those years ago.

I expect that in the long term we will be alright. I still have faith in our need to buy and sell and build businesses. I rather doubt that Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac or the sudden appearance of the evangelical Sarah Palin is the first sign of the end of days. The Rapture is not nigh. We survived 1929 and the Great Depression that followed. We survived two World Wars and the Cold War and Vietnam and 9-11 despite the incredible suffering associated with all of those events. Humans have survived natural and human created disasters all around the world. Through them all, people still fell in love, had babies, made do with what they had, made friends and worked together when they could. Those were hard times that required the best of the human spirit to emerge, and emerge it did. Oh, there were plenty of evil acts and a fair number of evil people. There was exploitation and crime as there has been throughout human history, but those were also times of great nobility and character. Some of our greatest creativity and greatest generosity emerged in such hard times. I am reminded of my trip to Africa in February. When violence broke out after the Kenyan elections, hundreds of thousands of people were forced from their homes. Others took them in. People who had nothing to start with gave the refugees food, shelter and protection. They adopted orphan children, they opened their volunteer schools and their hearts to these strangers.

We human beings are never more capable of showing just how good we can be than when the world collapses around us. We will get through whatever is coming in the next few years as long as we hang onto our Principles faithfully and hang on to our own dignity. We can lose our money, but no bank can mortgage our dignity. No speculator can lay claim to our sense of worth. And if I have anything preacherly to say today it's simply this: Right now is a good time to start remembering that what's most important is not what we own or where we live or what we can buy.

As the cynical Coyote said in our reading, "Humans buy things to show they've got money. After they buy things they really don't have the money. So they really buy things to show they have money left over after they have everything they want. People who live on subsistence can't play the game. You have to have money over and above what you need, or be able to pretend you do to play the game." "You can use a credit card," I said ruefully.

"That's just borrowing someone else's money to pretend it's yours. That seems to be a national habit."

Right now, we have an opportunity to rethink the game and change some habits. But the game is not who we are at the core of our beings. I know I'm guilty of Coyote's charges and expect I am not alone here. There's a very good chance that our family lifestyle will have to change in the next five years and that I will have to finally learn the lessons of thrift that my Depression-era parents tried so hard to teach me. Retirement will probably be deferred. I expect I will have to get myself in good shape so I can start working at McDonald's once I leave the ministry. Perhaps I should start working in the

kitchen on recipes to make cat food palatable. It could become a useful skill.

I bet a lot of people are thinking along those lines one way or another with greater or lesser degrees of anxiety. "Don't panic!" So, I return to what I said a moment ago: Right now is a good time to start remembering that what's most important is not what we own or where we live or what we can buy. What's most important is how deeply we love ourselves and the people around us. The important things are the ties that bind us to others as friends, as family members, as members of communities and citizens of cities, provinces, nations and the world.

Many of us thought this election was pointless a few weeks ago. I know that for the first time in my life I contemplated not voting at all as a kind of private protest. But the events of the last couple of weeks have changed things for me. The candidates are no better, and the short term prospects certainly don't look too bright. But it is a crisis like this that reminds me that the only real salvation comes from living with a personal faith and a personal set of moral rules and guidelines. One of the messages my parents taught that did stick was that voting was a right and an obligation. For some, it has been a hard won right. My moral make-up – and I am not prescribing or judging anyone else who thinks differently- but my moral make-up says I have to vote. It is my duty.

In times of crisis and great anxiety it is going back to those basics of our make-up that will ground us.

So maybe it's a good thing that this particular sermon falls on Thanksgiving Sunday. The art of giving thanks starts with personal reflection. Who are we? What matters most to us? What do we hold dear? To whom or to what ideas do we turn in times of fear and crisis?

I suggest that it is those things for which we can be, no, for which we are in our heart of hearts truly thankful, that matter the most. Now is the time to name them and hold them close. They will help us get past this. Keeping them close will help us see through the empty rhetoric and the fear-mongering headlines. They will keep us from panic.

And when we do the self-examination, I bet that the focus of our gratitude will be the people we love, the ideas we cherish and the abilities we have been given. None of those things cost money. None of those things are seriously harmed by the economic crisis. None of those things will be changed by the election...

Well, my goodness. The last thing I thought would emerge when I sat down to write on Friday was a Thanksgiving sermon. How about that?

May the spirit of gratitude be with us and guide us in the months ahead.