

ELITISM: A RECONSIDERATION

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February 22, 2009

TEACHINGS FROM ANCIENT SOURCES

From Luke's Gospel, Chapter 11

While he was speaking, a Pharisee asked Jesus to dine with him; so he went and sat at the man's table. The Pharisee was astonished to see that Jesus did not wash before dinner. And the Lord said to him:

"Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of extortion and wickedness. You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? But give for alms those things which are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.

But woe to you, Pharisees; For you love the best seat in the synagogues and salutations in the market place. Woe to you; for you are like graves which are not seen, and men walk over them without knowing it."

One of the lawyers who was also at the table answered him, "Teacher, in saying this you reproach us also." And Jesus said,

"Woe to you lawyers also, for you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers... Woe to you; for you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. So you are witnesses and consent to the deeds of your fathers; for they killed them and you build their tombs... Woe to you; for you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves and you hindered those who were entering."

TEACHINGS FROM MODERN SOURCES

From *Lincoln's Melancholy* by Joshua Wolf Shenk

Never had the conditions for a president-elect been so severe, and never had one seemed, by his credentials, so poorly prepared. Lincoln's fifteen predecessors had included war hero generals, vice presidents, secretaries of state and veterans of Congress. His own resume listed, as he put it, "one term in the lower house of Congress." He'd had barely a year of formal education; he had few connections in the capital and no executive experience. Before coming to Washington, he had been east of the

Alleghenies just a handful of times and still bore the stamp of a man raised on the frontier.

Surveying the start of Lincoln's term, Harriet Beecher Stowe compared the nation to a ship on a perilous passage, at its helm, "A plain working man of the people, with no more culture, instruction or education than any such working man may obtain." She continued, "The eyes of princes, nobles, aristocrats, of dukes, earls, scholars, statesmen, warriors, all turned on this plain backwoodsman...watched him in fearful curiosity, simply asking, "will that awkward old backwoodsman really get that ship through?"

Edward Everett, the former senator, Harvard University president and ordained Unitarian minister who would share the dais with Lincoln at Gettysburg offered his blunt assessment in a diary entry on February 15, 1861. "The President-elect is making a zigzag progress to Washington and is called out to make short speeches at every important point. These speeches thus far have been of the most ordinary kind, destitute of everything, not merely of felicity and grace, but of common pertinence. He is evidently a person of very inferior cast of character, wholly unequal to the crisis."

** REFLECTIONS **

In the early 1800's, as both Unitarianism and Universalism were struggling to achieve greater recognition and stature, each movement produced an exceptional religious thinker. For the Unitarians it was **William Ellery Channing**, whose closely reasoned sermons and essays made the "heresy" of Unitarianism respectable. Under Channing, the Federal Street Church in Boston became a beacon of progressive thought in New England.

On the Universalist side, we find **Hosea Ballou**, an exceptional intellect whose book *A Treatise on Atonement* demolished arguments advanced by Catholics and Calvinists to support the doctrines of human depravity, hellfire and eternal damnation. **Ballou** maintained that our Heavenly Father - if he truly is a father with a father's tender feelings - would be incapable of sentencing any of his children, whatever their crime, to an unlimited term of unimaginable torment. For a quarter-century **Ballou** ministered to a Boston congregation only a few blocks from Dr. Channing's and regularly drew crowds of close to a thousand.

Now these two men, both preeminent in their respective movements and both committed to theological reform, had nothing to do with each other. In a city where pulpit exchanges between liberal preachers were commonplace, **Ballou** was never invited to speak in Channing's Federal Street church. Part of the explanation for this was theological. At a time when Unitarians were beginning to enjoy respectability, they did not want to be accused of toying with an arch-heresy like universal salvation. **Channing** was a religious progressive, but he considered **Hosea Ballou** a downright radical. "The growth of Universalism is the most threatening moral evil in our part of the country," the Unitarian solemnly declared.

But even if their theological differences could have been resolved, **Ballou** and **Channing** would have remained socially incompatible. As **Ernest Cassara** observes of early 19th century New England: "The Unitarians generally were of a higher social class,

their ministers were Harvard literati who tended to be contemptuous of the unlearned Universalist clergy. They saw the Universalist preachers as a motley group whose crudeness...excited disgust.

Like most of his Unitarian brethren, William Ellery Channing, "held himself aloof from such a common person" as **Ballou** whose folksy story-telling and unrefined diction betrayed a lack of formal theological training. For his part, **Ballou** offered no apologies for his humble background. While he placed a high value on education, **Ballou** held that theological schools like Harvard were unnecessary. Indeed, he said, they are "employed in teaching youth how to avoid the plain testimony of Jesus and how to keep people from receiving it."

In saying this **Ballou** was echoing words spoken by **Jesus** when he was reproached at that dinner party mentioned earlier. The first century Pharisees and lawyers were the Harvard grads of their day, for they possessed the rare ability to read and write and they were expected to maintain strict standards of social and religious protocol. **Jesus**, a provincial teacher with charisma but no real credentials, either wasn't familiar with their "rules" or chose to ignore them. He condemned his table-mates as all show and no substance - elitists lacking real spiritual insight. "You have taken away the key of knowledge" from those who would enter the Kingdom," he accuses.

This was an issue not only for religious leaders but for aspiring 19th century politicians. **Edward Everett's** disparaging comments about **Abraham Lincoln's** homespun speaking style closely resembled **William Ellery Channing's** disapproval of **Ballou**. It is more than a little ironic, then, that when **Everett and Lincoln** were both invited to speak at the dedication ceremony of the new military cemetery at Gettysburg, **Everett** would be upstaged. The latter had prepared a two-hour peroration which stood in stark contrast to **Lincoln's** two-minute address that began so memorably with the words, "Four-score and seven years ago..." **Lincoln's** brief message came to be regarded as one of the truly great speeches of all time while **Edward Everett's** dissertation has disappeared entirely from the public's memory.

Lincoln, by the way, wasn't the first American president to be scoffed at by those of higher social status. When **Andrew Jackson** ran for President against **John Quincy Adams** - the latter a Harvard graduate with a command of seven languages, a string of ambassadorships and a stint as Secretary of State on his resume -- **Thomas Jefferson** declared the self-educated upstart from Tennessee to be "utterly unfit" for the Presidency. **Jackson's** opponents likened him to a jackass - an image that later would be adopted as the symbol of his grass-roots Democratic party.

The preceding examples may help us appreciate that the word "elite" can stand for two very different things. On the one hand, it suggests a certain class of individuals whose breeding, social and political connections, institutional affiliations and code of conduct define them. If one belongs to the "elite" order they must meet certain qualifications: prep school and Ivy League diplomas, proper manners, Kennebunkport cottages, a secure position on the social register, useful business and political connections. Before the 2000 elections columnist **Maureen Dowd** wrote that "Like his father, George W. Bush's message is this: Trust me, I've been bred for this job." The first meaning of the word "elite" is captured in that sentence.

But there is a second sense in which the term can be understood. Synonyms for "elite" include "the best" and "cream of the crop." Thus, sportscasters often refer to **Serena Williams, Michael Phelps or Tiger Woods** as elite athletes. Similarly, one can speak of a literary, scientific or musical elite. Here we are talking about people who are exceptional because they make the most of their abilities. Often they possess a special talent or gift and will go to extraordinary lengths to develop it.

Abraham Lincoln was an "elite" president not because he had been "bred for the job" and thus felt entitled to it but because he possessed the temperament and intelligence to handle his onerous responsibilities exceptionally well. **Harold Bloom**, perhaps the nation's leading literary critic, grew up in a poor, Yiddish-speaking household in the South Bronx and attended college on scholarship. His interest in poetry began at age ten and by the age of twelve, **Bloom** remembers, "All I wanted to do was to read poetry and discuss it." It's that sort of desire that propels a person into the elite.

A passion for, and an ability to recognize excellence - what it means to be the best - is what "elite" means in the second sense. In that classic film *It's All about Eve* which takes us inside the New York City theater scene, newspaper critic **Addison DeWitt** remarks: "I live in the theater as a Trappist monk - I have no other interest and no other life." It is the determination to hone his craft to its finest edge that made **DeWitt** the city's most respected authority on his subject.

In recent decades, however these two understandings of the word "elite" have become confused in our public discourse - a trend that may have begun with Nixon's vice-president **Spiro Agnew** who castigated his opponents as effete, intellectual "elitists" who looked down on those wholesome, hard-working folk who constitute the "silent majority." In the last election, his opponents tried to pin that label on **Barack Obama** when he awkwardly tried to explain the frustrations of the American working class. Suddenly, a man of mixed racial heritage who grew up middle class and worked as a community organizer on Chicago's troubled Southside became an "elitist" out of touch with a large percentage of the voting public. In an article that appeared last Spring in *The New York Times* **Susan Jacoby** wrote:

What was once an accolade has turned poisonous in American public life...as both the left and the right have twisted "elite" into a code word meaning "not one of us..." The most ominous wrinkle in the new denigration of all things elite is that the slur is being applied to knowledge itself.

This sentiment may have receded somewhat since those words were printed. Many American seem genuinely pleased that our new president is articulate and well-informed. They also seem to like the fact that, rather than political

hacks, he has brought experts of the highest caliber into his administration. Nevertheless, for several decades now Americans have been repeatedly admonished not to trust people with intellectual credentials who "know too much." It wouldn't take much to rekindle such doubts.

It is somewhat striking, however, that many ordinary Americans harbor dreams of taking their place among that other elite - the one defined not so much by knowledge or ability but by inherited or acquired social status. "The hunger of Americans for lineage, titles and royal genealogy" has increased in recent decades, **Kevin Phillips** notes and there has been a proliferation of organizations requiring applicants to show "demonstrable ties to gentry, nobility or royalty." Similarly, the modest Cape Cod and Craftsman designs of the early 20th century have given way in modern subdivisions to homes meant to resemble small mansions.

Even as they have become more critical of the intellectual elite, Americans have grown more comfortable with those whose wealth, position and family lineage make them stand out. Income inequality hasn't seemed to bother us as much as educational inequality. A person of inherited privilege with a steady stream of passive income and a membership in the city's finest country club is seen as more of a "regular fellow" than someone with a Ph.D. who is fluent in a foreign language and earns \$60,000 teaching at the local community college.

Of course, not everyone with knowledge and education is held in suspicion. The highly trained men and women who unblock our arteries, trouble-shoot our computers and build our bridges still earn our respect. Problems typically arise when those who are demonstrably smart or talented flaunt their credentials and withhold respect from others. It is this that people find off-putting.

Joe Bageant, a journalist and editor with blue-collar roots returned to his old working class neighborhood in Winchester, Virginia in an effort to understand attitudes of the people he grew up with. Many of these men and women either dropped out of or never went beyond high school and are stuck in menial dead-end jobs they don't really like. Even if they could afford it, more schooling is not an option because it would put them in an awkward social position. "What my friends refuse to acknowledge," **Bageant** writes, is "that it takes genuine education and at least some effort toward self-improvement just to get to the starting line of socioeconomic equality... But no one...is

about to say such a thing out loud because it sounds elitist..."

Joe Bageant doubts that these attitudes are likely to shift anytime soon. He predicts that the "stigma" of higher education will remain until the self-segregation of these two groups - knowledge workers and manual workers - is overcome. The problem, he suggests, rests mostly with well-educated, solidly middle-class folks who don't think of themselves as an "elite" because they "live among clones of themselves." The lives of the people scanning their groceries at the supermarket, or caring for nursing home patients are invisible to them, and so their resentment comes as a surprise.

Negative attitudes are hardened, **Bageant** says, because members of the working class often feel they are treated disrespectfully and dismissively by the physicians, social workers and teachers they must occasionally deal with but whom they also seek to avoid. Rarely is there any opportunity for information sharing and trust-building between these two sectors of the workforce.

We all need people to admire and look up to. Cultural conflict arises when the elite becomes "elitist;" when a person's awareness of his superior position causes him to regard and to treat those around him as inferior beings. This was the error our Unitarian forebears fell into and which caused them to underestimate talented men like **Jackson and Lincoln**.

So what can we do to avoid falling into similar habits of elitism? In the first place, as Unitarian Universalists we can make an effort to apply our own First Principle more consistently: making it a daily spiritual practice to "promote the worth and dignity of every person."

In the most recent issue of our denominational magazine, *The World*, readers were urged in one essay to "become dignitarians" because simple dignity is something that "everybody wants, craves and seeks." Whole lives can be transformed, the authors insisted, when people are accorded greater dignity.

A novel term - "rankism" -- appears in that same article. Rankism - the abuse of power attached to rank - is rampant in the world today. When we feel "special" or "better than" someone else and "believe that this superiority carries with it the license to diminish another person's dignity," we are guilty of rankism - which I think is just another term for elitism. But whatever term we use, the point is a valid one: dignity is an essential component of human development and thus it is critical for those who

hold rank -- who belong to the elite -- to use their position and authority to "protect the dignity of all."

This can happen more readily if we work harder to open up fresh lines of communication - identifying and seizing opportunities to dispel stereotypes and clean up what has become a toxic social environment. There are lots of ways to do this: by striking up informal conversations at Farmer's Market or the County Fair, working at an election polling place in a neighborhood other than one's own, tutoring in a public school or eating at the counter of a family diner.

As Unitarian Universalists, the issue is especially relevant because ours is a unique blend of two spiritual traditions that historically have understood the word "elite" in different ways. **William Ellery Channing**, was a brilliant man, but on occasion his education and privilege caused him to diminish rather than uphold the dignity of others. He was an elitist. The self-tutored and equally brilliant **Hosea Ballou** was so supportive of human dignity that he saw all souls as deserving of salvation. **Like Lincoln and Jesus of Nazareth, Ballou** was elite without being elitist. It is his legacy that I would commend to you today.