



Reading

This reading comes from Rod Dreher's book, "Crunchy Cons: How birkenstocked Burkeans, gun-loving organic gardeners, evangelical free-range farmers, hip homeschooling mamas, right-wing nature lovers, and their diverse tribe of countercultural conservatives plan to save America (or at least the Republican Party)."

Too many people who call themselves conservative share the same fundamental conviction of many liberals, namely, that individual fulfillment is the point of life. Conservative, perhaps, in their sexual views, they are, however, libertarian in their economic principles, and believe that the free market should be the guiding light of our lives together. Thus they believe that a merchant or a manufacturer owes no loyalty to his community, nor the community to that merchant or manufacturer. They feel no particular responsibility to be good stewards of communal life or the natural world; if something of real value has been lost because of economic decisions, hey, that's the free market....

There is an older, less-ideological tradition, a sensibility that comes out in people I call crunchy conservatives. We are conservatives by conviction and temperament... but we're crunchy – as in the slang for earthy – because we stand alongside a number of lefties who don't buy in to the consumerist and individualist mainstream of American life....

[My mission] is to explore ways that we who espouse conservative values can live more true to them, despite living in a society in which the structure of the economy, the influence of mass media, and the prevailing cultural mentality serve to separate us from our values, our families, and our communities. This is not a book that means to change the world. This is a book that means to change individual lives and families, to help them live more truly and meaningfully conservative lives ...

I do not expect conventional liberals and conservatives to get crunchy conservatism, mostly because ... they have confused means with ends. The liberty we enjoy in America today is certainly worth prizing and defending, but it is insufficient to produce virtue, stability or happiness. The free market in ideas, commerce, sexuality, and so forth offers us various possibilities of how to live, but it tells us nothing of how we should behave to live as well as we ought. Both mainstream liberalism and conservatism are essentially materialist ideologies, and we should not be surprised that both shape a society dedicated to the multiplication of wants and the intensification of desire, not to the improvement of character.

Crunchy conservatism is... a sensibility, an attitude, a fundamental stance toward reality, and a pretty good road map to a rich, responsible, fulfilling, charitable, and above all, joyful life. It's about living a life mindful of and honoring the wisdom in tradition, and in so doing building a tradition to pass on to one's children and to future generations. It doesn't aim to make folks wealthier except where it counts: in their relationships to each other and to the natural world.

Sermon

When Rod Dreher told his editor at the National Review, a conservative publication, that he was leaving early to pick up his family's order of organic vegetables, she looked at him like he was nuts! "That's so lefty!" she said. It was one more sign to Rod that he was becoming somewhat different from many of his conservative friends and acquaintances. The summer before, when learning that some women in his wife's Manhattan-based mother's group had joined a food co-op, he'd reacted similarly. "Just like liberals," he thought, "having to have their politically correct eats." But then, they had the chance to try some of those vegetables and were blown away by the difference in taste. Rod's curiosity kicked in, and when he learned more about where the food came from, about the farmers who grew those vegetables, and their values of simplicity, community and self-reliance, values that he as a conservative believed in, he signed on.

Buying organic local vegetables became a way for him and Julie to live out their conservative values. They disliked factory farms, shopping malls, chain stores, and mass consumerism. Rod didn't like how his childhood Louisiana rural community had been sold out to developers and transformed into McMansion land. When Rod and Julie signed on to the food co-op, they both felt good about supporting something that pointed to a different way. Strange, he thought, that in their commitment to local and small and environmental, they shared some core values with others at the co-op, the vast majority of whom were unapologetic liberals.

If it was strange for them, imagine what it must have been like for those they met at the co-op. Julie loved pulling out her National Review tote bags and watching the expression on the faces of the others. They had assumed that conservatives simply



Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

weren't interested, that a commitment to supporting local organic farmers was a typically leftist liberal thing to do. Her presence placed before them the reality that it's possible for liberals and conservatives to share some core values.

And what were some of those core values? A deep respect for the earth, a prizing of communitarianism, and a holding up of a world view that places the spiritual and material needs of ordinary people over the acquisition of wealth.

Many of us here would call ourselves liberal or progressive in some way. Emerson Chapel calls itself a “liberal” religious community, and I doubt it would surprise many to say there can be, both implicitly and explicitly, a deep suspicion of anything conservative amongst many of our members and friends.

This is in part a function of our history – since their earliest days both Unitarianism and Universalism considered themselves to be liberal religions. This is also a function of our particular time. Since Franklin D. Roosevelt implemented the New Deal and Social Security during the Depression of the 1930s, there has been a widening gap and varying levels of hostility between those who call themselves liberal and those who call themselves conservative. You could say that hostility has reached a certain fevered pitch in the last two decades with the rising political power of the religious right and the take over of the Republican Party by neo-conservatives. One of the easiest ways to shut someone down around here is to describe their values or opinions as being conservative. And to be fair, in American culture as it stands now, those who claim to be conservative often espouse values that are at odds with values that many of us hold.

So what are some of these value differences? Conservatives tend to value traditional family. Liberals are more likely to value and recognize a diversity of family forms. Conservatives tend to be anti-gay rights, anti-feminism, and anti-choice. Liberals tend to be supportive of sexual diversity, women's liberation, and reproductive rights. Conservatives tend to distrust government. Liberals tend to see a stronger role for government in society. Conservatives tend to support unfettered economic development. Liberals tend to want more checks and balances on business. Conservatives tend to dismiss fears of environmental degradation. Liberals tend to take this much more seriously and advocate for more interventionist measures to protect the environment. Conservatives tend to be drawn to religions offering absolute truth and emphasizing the depraved nature of humanity. Liberals tend to be drawn to religious and spiritual systems that have a more fluid understanding of truth and emphasize the goodness and potential of humanity.

Notice how many times I've said “tend to” in this list of values. There are no package deals here. There are many ways to be conservative, just as there are many ways to be liberal. You can be political, cultural, religious or social conservatives, you can be political, cultural, religious or social liberals. The problem is that in our polarized society we tend to have a package of values and opinions that we attach to being liberal and being conservative.

Maybe that's why, when I first learned of Rod Dreher's Crunchy Con that I was so drawn to it. I still think Dreher misrepresents and misunderstands liberalism, and frankly I don't much care for his judgments of feminism and homosexuality as threatening the family. But, I am drawn to a kind of conservatism that challenges some of my understandings of what it means to be a conservative.

And I thought to myself, perhaps there is something here for us as religious liberals to learn, especially as we move into an election year that is guaranteed to encourage a lot of black and white either/or thinking. One of our core religious values is balance. Another religious value for us is harmony. And yet another is openness. Is the closed mindedness that many of us exercise towards conservatives a true reflection of the practice of our faith? And if we are truly committed to balance and harmony, let's be honest with ourselves. There is, in each of us, a part that wants to be open and flexible, highly responsive to change. There is also, in each of us, a place where change is not welcome. Where we're not willing to negotiate. Where we would rather that things just stay as they are. Each of us is both conservative and liberal. In that striving toward balance and harmony that is so central to being human, we need to claim both in order to be closer to that vision of wholeness that each of us would so want for ourselves and those we love.

In order to understand conservatism it's helpful to understand some of its history. Conservatism is a very modern way of looking at the world, and by modern I don't mean the last 50 years, I mean the last 250 years. Conservatism emerged in the late 1700s as a response to what was going on in France and the United States.



In 1789, France erupted into a bloody revolution. The rising middle class was fed up with a rigid system defined by King, Aristocracy, and Church. The conditions were right in France for an uprising, and in a matter of a few years, the revolutionaries brought the old order to its knees. The monarchy was gone. The aristocracy was gone. The church's power was tremendously weakened.

Many in Britain and in mainland Europe were horrified. There were fears that what happened in France could happen anywhere. No where was the fear greater than in England, which had already suffered a humiliating defeat in the American Revolution, and was going through massive economic changes which caused a lot of social unrest. When Revolution broke out in France, some English radicals hoped a similar thing could happen in England. For good reason, the powers that be in England were nervous.

So that's what was going on in Britain. In the U.S. something different was going on. Conservatism arose out of the American Revolution. For some people, particularly your middle class joe, the American Revolution was about creating a new kind of freedom, radically egalitarian for its time that is, of course, if you were white. But for others, particularly American born upper middle class people, they wanted the kind of power that the British colonial classes enjoyed. Because they were viewed by the British as lower colonists, no matter how wealthy they got, they constantly bumped against this glass ceiling. For them, the Revolution was not about creating some new egalitarian utopian order. It was about simply getting rid of the British upper class and taking its place. So there were different agendas in the American Revolution. One was truly revolutionary – the desire to build a new order. The other was not. It was about keeping the status quo, just changing who was at the privileged powerful top. (Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 1980).

Out of that need to defend the status quo both in Britain and America, what we now call conservatism emerged. And over time, six principles came to be identified as indicators of the conservative mindset. First, there is a moral order that comes from a divine source. Don't mess with it. Time doesn't change that moral order. It is absolute and eternal. Second, continuity is important. Change too much too fast and you destroy the moral order. Third, tradition is the source of most wisdom. Breaking with the past also destroys the moral order. Fourth, prudence or caution is very important. Think carefully before changing anything as all change has consequences for the moral order. Fifth, differences in wealth and power are natural and also part of the moral order. And sixth, imperfection is part of human nature. It cannot be eradicated and must simply be accepted. (Russell Kirk, *The Portable Conservative Reader*, 1982).

Now I imagine that each person here will have their own reaction to this understanding of conservatism and I certainly have mine. Who gets to define that moral order? Who gets to decide what change is prudent and what change isn't? How convenient this way of thinking would be for one who is in a position of power, who can say that some high moral authority justifies their privilege. It is very easy to say change needs to be slow when things are going well for you. Try telling someone who is struggling to make ends meet that they should be patient, that change needs to happen slowly. I react strongly to the idea that inequality is natural and should be accepted. These principles go against many of my liberal values, and I doubt that I am alone. I believe there is incredible possibility for an abuse of power that could easily be justified by these principles.

But, there are a growing number of conservatives who believe that the current abuses of conservatism are happening because these principles have been abandoned. Modern conservatives have twisted their conservatism into a justification for greed and shelved those aspects of conservatism that are challenging. Basically, they have turned their backs on the moral order. Political efforts to stack the Supreme Court are a form of state-imposed social engineering and go against the conservative principle of individual morality. The conservative embrace of economic progress has done as much to destroy the family as the moral issues that have raged front and center for the last decade. Far more important is the debilitating dependence on foreign oil and insatiable consumerism. As Rod Dreher so strongly proclaims, “It is time for conservatives who believe we are called, as conservatives, to live more responsibly and more humanely, to stand up within the broader conservative movement, and speak out for our principles.” (226)

To me, this sounds a lot like our seventh principle, that we affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence. Where conservatives would say the moral order has been broken, we would say strands of that interdependent web have snapped. Where conservatives would say, we must conform our lives to this moral order, a liberal might say, it is time to realign ourselves into a place of harmony and balance within that web. Each of these is a different way of saying what many of us are feeling – it is time to live more responsibly and more humanely because somehow, we are badly off track.



"Will the Real Conservative Please Stand Up?"

Rev. Krista Taves

February 3, 2008

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

As a religious liberal, I feel hope knowing that there are those on the other side of the divide asking themselves hard questions. I have to admit, I think this country would be a much better one if there were more Rod Dreher's out there.

I also think we have much to gain from acknowledging the conservative impulse inside ourselves. Each of us has, at our core, some deep sense of a moral order. It may be more of a gut feeling than a clearly thought out theology or philosophy, it may hold the idea of absolute truth a bit more lightly, but I think we all have it. I often see glimpses of a person's moral order when I see what kind of change they welcome, and what kind of change they resist. When you're feeling resistance, for instance, what part of your moral order is being threatened? What would be lost for you if that change happened? What are you protecting through your resistance?

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not have one moral system that we ask each of you to conform to. That would go against our tradition of non-creedalism. The wisdom of our ancestors, our continuity, is this commitment to the free church tradition, where we ask you to look into your personal conscience as a place that bears truth and wisdom. Our free church tradition also calls us into the bonds of beloved community where we are called to a blending of hearts and minds freely joined together.

Part of the religious journey as we see it, is to discern your moral order, so that it's more than a gut feeling, but something you think about carefully and consciously, not so unlike that call to prudence in those conservative principles. What we believe matters. What we do with our beliefs is even more important. The religious journey is not only discerning what you believe, it is then about gradually aligning yourself with those beliefs so that your life mirrors your heart and your mind.

And that is something that transcends both conservative and liberal - harmony and balance as deep universal spiritual needs. When I think of the things that divide us, I have no illusions that there are moral values that will continue to distinguish liberal and conservative. And I thank God that there are those out there fighting for my values. There are places where I would never wish to compromise. But that cannot erase the hunger for unity, for peace, for understanding, and the deep need for mutual respect of one another. There are ways to engage change and resistance, ways that keep our humanity before each other. Let's hold on to that. It may be the only way to make our way through this complicated and amazing world.