

# "Are You a Real American?"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister  
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, November 14, 2010

In 2008, Sarah Palin argued that *real* America has a specific set of homogenous values that just happened to agree with her own. And even though she later apologized for her comments, the question she raised remains relevant: Who is a real American?

I am a real American. I was born in Oakland, California at the Naval Hospital, was raised in Oklahoma, went to public school, played sports, and frequented the public library. By 13 I learned gun safety and had fired a .22 pistol and an AR15 semi-automatic weapon, something Sarah Palin would be proud of. At 15 I started earning money and paying taxes, and by 16 was driving on public roads in my own car. After high school, I served as a Rotary International Student Ambassador to Belgium just as Gulf War I broke out/ This was a scholarship program funded by the generosity of American and Belgian Rotarians. I paid my own way through a state funded school, the University of Oklahoma, supported by scholarships, government grants, and money lent to me and secured by the government. My liberal education in Philosophy and French was also funded, in part, by my job at the Oklahoma Republican Party headquarters in Oklahoma City, where I worked for two years.

As you can see, I am in fact more complicated than any pollster can classify, and I would bet that you are too. There just aren't enough boxes on the form to check. And though your experience may in fact be completely opposite of mine, I would still argue that *you* are a real American, too. I am a real American living what is considered to be the American dream. I own a home, have a respectable job, insurance coverage, two dogs, and a family. And even though my relationship is not recognized legally in this country, we are not ridiculed, or tortured, or punished while we live out our lives waiting for the law to catch up.

Although I may not fit Sarah Palin's definition of a real American, I am not a fake American or a phony American. I am not an ungrateful American or un-American. I am a *real* American who is patriotic, and at the same time aware of my own privilege. I am a real American who knows that our freedom was not free, and continues to be paid for with the lives of soldiers and activists, farmers and the working class. I am a real American who knows that our history includes inspiration, as well as appropriation, slavery, greed, and controversy. And I still have faith that this Democracy gifted to us by our forbearers will continue to move this country toward more and more justice, and more and

more freedom, if more Americans will invest in its future. And that our future looks more and more diverse.

According to a 2008 survey, a third of us [Americans] are ethnic and racial minorities, [and that is increasing]: Already, nearly 45% of children under five are minorities. Although 88% of us believe in God, 70% think that religions other than our own are equally valid routes to truth. And while 59% of us think that wearing an American flag pin is a decent way to show patriotism, even more of us (66%) think that protesting U.S. policies [that] we oppose is [also] a good way to show [our] patriotism. Unfortunately, a closer look also shows that over half of us would fail a civics literacy test, unable to answer basic questions about how our country is run, what rights we have as a citizen, and the power we have to affect change. Questions like: what are the three branches of government? What powers specifically belong to the federal government? And what rights are guaranteed in the Bill of Rights?

On the one hand it is extremely easy to be an American. For most of us there is no quiz, no test. If you were lucky enough to be born in this country, you were gifted certain rights that people will fight for you to have, even if you don't know what they are! On the other hand, in order for our government to properly represent the majority of Americans, the majority of Americans must be actively involved, or those who are involved must be actively looking out for those who are not actively involved. So what threatens our government from succeeding in representing the actual majority – from representing *real* America – is not the two-party system or the bureaucracy. What threatens the basic rights of Americans is not special interest groups, consumerism, or a biased media. What threatens the future of America and the health of our system is a denial of our diversity and apathy.

A real American embraces our diversity, recognizes that a person can be a real American and live in a city, can be a real American and speak with an accent, can be a real American and be a Muslim, and be a real American and be a Conservative Christian. Sarah Palin, God bless her, is a real American. So is President Obama. And a real American is also invested in, educated about, and involved in our democracy. It may be easy for most of us to be classified as an American, but to be a responsible citizen takes an investment: it doesn't just happen. And if you have a vision of an America for our children that includes education and health care for all, and an economy that supports opportunities for every American to be able to feed and clothe their families, these are not rights granted to us. They must be spoken for. Demanded. If you have a vision of the future America that involves fewer Americans in prison, fewer Americans on drugs, and fewer Americans in poverty, a

vision of saving the soul of this country. It will take an investment of your time, your talent, and your treasure,

Invest in learning about our history as well as our present. Invest your skills where you can, do what you can do to further your values in your community, be an educated voter. Invest your treasure: pay your taxes and financially support organizations that further your values. That's what it will take to save the soul of this country.

Saving souls *in* this country will also take a commitment of your time, your talent, and your treasure. Saving the country's soul and the souls of this country are equally important. This church is a model of what it means to embrace diversity and gather around shared values. What if those 70% of Americans who believe that religions other than our own are equally valid routes to truth were seen and heard as the majority? The perception of the majority is of a homogenous flavor of Christianity, but it is not true. If this church, this one church that allows for many expressions of faith, really represents the values of the average American – of real America – then we are called to be seen and heard as such. Our country needs us. And that is going to take responsible membership.

So let me shift gears a minute: if a real American is one that embraces diversity and who is involved in democracy, *what is a Real Unitarian?* First of all, a Unitarian is someone who believes that all people come from one source. We can call that source whatever we like: God, the Universe, Great Spirit, Holy One. The name is just a name. *One source.* Secondly, a Unitarian is historically someone who, when asked the question at the time of the Council of Nicea (in 325 AD), Is Jesus Human or Divine? Unitarians answered that either/or question with a definitive *yes*, and maintained that there is but one *God* to which all names ultimately address. Was Jesus divine? Yes. Was Jesus Human? Yes. Did that make Unitarians during the council of Nicea heretics? Yes, indeed it did. So what is a real Unitarian? Someone who believes all of humanity comes from the same source (no matter what it is called) and respects either answer on the divinity of Jesus.

*What is a real Universalist?* First, A Universalist is someone who believes that when we die we all go to the same place. Names for that place vary greatly: Heaven, a return to Source, we replenish the life that remains, we become nothing, we become energy, from dust to dust as it is said. The point is that Universalists do not believe that there is a great decider who sorts people into different places, depending on how well they behaved or whether or not they spoke magic words while they were alive. *We come from the same place, and we all end up in the same place.* Secondly, Universalists historically have been of two sorts: Universalist Christians who believe that Jesus' Crucifixion covered

salvation for all of us, and there were also Universalists who are called Universalists because they believe that there are Universal truths that we all hold in common, despite our religious or even secular diversity. So no matter the theology; whether we are Christian, Buddhist, Atheist, Agnostic, Jewish, Muslim, or Hindu, we are all climbing up the same mountain on a different path but we end up at the same place. *“Many paths to the same God.”* In order for us to be seen and heard as a force to be reckoned with in the battle for the soul of America, we must be articulate about who we are. So as real Unitarians and Universalists, in our church we believe that we all come from the same place and will all end up in the same place.

Some will say that being part of our religious tradition is incredibly easy. We have no creed to memorize, nothing to give up at Lent, you can drink if you want, no one forces you to knock on people’s doors to save souls, no attendance record is being kept, there’s no mandatory tithe percentage (so feel free to give more than 10%.) You don’t even have to read the Bible. But I disagree as far as our church is concerned. Who is a real member? The easy answer is that an active member is someone who has signed the membership book and has made a pledge of record. But there is a difference between a member of our faith tradition and a responsible member of our faith. The bar may be set low to belong, but in order for us and our churches and our tradition to live out our fullest potential, the bar is actually set extraordinarily high. We need more responsible members: people who invest in our present and our future, people who are pursuing the difficult task of ongoing personal spiritual competency, people who appreciate our diversity and can articulate what we have in common, people who are biblically literate because our culture demands it so that we can be in conversation with a significant portion of religious America, *and* people who support the church with their time, talent, and treasure.

Every time I lead a New Members class and explain that joining our church is deceptively simple – all you do is sign your name in a book and on a check – but what we are really seeking is for each member to bring their whole selves to church. To place their name symbolically among the names of all of those who have agreed to do the same. There is no test of membership. No one will be tracking you down to see if you have done your homework. The accountability is your own, but the church and the ministers are here to help guide you if you would like help along the way. In our new member class we talk about time, talent, and treasure. Part of that time we hope will be spent deepening your understanding your own relationship to our core theological themes, as well as educating yourself on the diversity of experience of those same themes in our own congregation.

We have twenty-seven themes that span three years: nine themes per year, September through May. How can you engage with these themes to increase your spiritual competency? I suggest to our new members the following ways to go deeper with our themes: I used to be a teacher, you know, so this is how you would make an A + in theme study and even gain a little extra credit.

1. Read our monthly journal Simple Gifts (which you can get online at the first of the month) to explore ideas on the theme (and ideally to begin considering the theme before hearing the sermons.)
2. Inside Simple Gifts is a list of quotes on the theme, which you can print and include as part of a journaling or meditation practice. Inside Simple Gifts there are also suggested spiritual practices on the theme.
3. Inside Simple Gifts is a book list for further reading. Choose one to add to your reading for the month.
4. Pick up a copy of the Parent Guide and read how our children are exploring the theme, including practical articles about how to answer our children's questions related to the themes. It includes a "UU Translator" and answers to big questions.
5. Attend the First Sunday of the month service, where Marlin will explore an aspect of the theme in detail in Sunday worship, and we will introduce the story for all ages that is used in our Children's Religious Education program for the month.
6. Attend Soulful Sundown on the first Friday of the month, where I conduct a more secular exploration of the theme using popular culture, including: live music, drama, video, slam poetry, and improv.
7. Join a Branches Group (our small group ministry program) where they will have an opportunity to examine how their own story and the theological theme of the month are intertwined. This is a great way to get to know other members of the congregation beyond surface level conversation by exploring the theme and how it touches our lives while learning tools of how to better listen to our own hearts and each other. (Open Branches meetings are the Second Wednesday of the month if you would like to experience our small group model before making a commitment.)
8. Attend our Wednesday Night Adult Religious Education Programming, or our Sunday morning Emerson Hall Forum, throughout the month for classes and lectures that relate to the theme.
9. Consider sharing your gifts and talents with our children by volunteering in our All Souls Kids program as a workshop leader.

And here is the extra credit: three times a year, Marlin leads a Theme Training for the upcoming three themes, taking an overview of the theme and why that theme is relevant to the church and to our lives. It is specifically for our leaders and teachers but is open to everyone, and would be a great way to know what is upcoming in the next three months of themes – in case you would like to propose a class to our Adult Religious Education Board, in case you would like to write and submit an article to our monthly journal, or to get ideas for how you might plug into a workshop with our Children’s Religious Education Program. Not to mention the fact that it’s just really interesting to know how the program staff and ministers are shaping the church experience.

Wow, it’s hard work being a responsible member!

What else can you do to be a responsible member of our church besides working on your own spiritual competency? Support the church financially, so that this institution will thrive in the present and so that it will be here for the next generation. Be an educated voter and come to our congregational meetings. Volunteer in one of our programs serving the church, or serving the community through the church.

And be proud of your affiliation with this free faith where we celebrate diversity with One Church and Many Expressions. Our church will be better for it, just as these United States of America will benefit from more responsible, more invested citizens. Our church will benefit from more responsible, more invested members, and our country will benefit from a more responsible and more invested free religious tradition across this nation, modeling the value of diversity as an organized majority. We are Real America.

God Bless you, and God Bless the United States of America.

Amen.