The Spirituality of Politics

Politics may appear to be an unexpected place to look for enchantment, yet it deeply affects the lives of all citizens and has meaning far beyond any practical considerations. The greatest temptation, from the viewpoint of the soul, is to treat any aspect of life too literally, without seeing its depth, resonance, and transparency, and politics is so concerned with information, decisions, and actions that it may seem to be the most literal aspect of culture. But unless we gain an appreciation for the interiority of politics, it will continue to be a massive barrier to cultural enchantment.

The word “politics” comes from the Greek word polis, meaning city, and shares the same root with “police.” Originally the word denoted a crowd, and only later a crowd formed into a city. We still have a few linguistic indications that politics has sacred connotations, as in the many crowds we call a metropolis—the mother city—originally the cathedral city where the archbishop held authority. A more recent word, “metropole,” refers to the “weaving” of several communities into one, and weaving is one of the chief attributes of the goddess Athena, the Greek archetype of citizenry and politics.

A crowd becomes a city, and therefore truly enters the realm of politics, when it develops an identity, a personality, and a spirit. All the major cities of the world are cathedral cities, not in the formal Christian sense but insofar as they perform the maternal functions of providing nourishment, comfort, protection, and family relatedness. We talk about our native city sometimes in maternal tones, when we ask each other not “Where do you live?” but “Where were
you born?” and “Where do you come from?” suggesting origins in the motherland.

I live in the country and enjoy the charms of nature and small communities, but when I travel to cities, I find a different magic, a powerful manifestation of human life, business, and creativity. It doesn’t seem to matter that almost all cities fail to work smoothly in providing services like transportation and garbage removal, for their incapacity is as enthralling as their ability to spawn endless forms of life. People’s attachment to cities, even when they are full of problems, indicates that a city is a soul place and that people relate to it as family.

**Politics as Care**

Another word for city life, and close to “politics,” is “civil.” Its root is in the Indo-European *kei*, which means bed, rest, endearment, and is related to “cemetery.” This word has strong soul qualities of intimacy and relatedness, and might give us direction in discovering the soul of politics. It suggests that the role of politics is to make a home for the dead, give us all a place where we can sleep, and foster a sense of mutual endearment.

These goals are all quite different from the more practical aims we usually consider appropriate for politicians: that they should be preoccupied with life, make the system work, govern, and administrate. Yet the root words surrounding politics imply work of the heart more than the brain, the caretaking of human life rather than an effort to keep the machine of society well oiled and operating. I doubt very much that John F. Kennedy’s portrait hangs in the homes of so many people around the world because he was an efficient administrator. It may be telling that many who honor him now didn’t agree with him during his lifetime, and most are not terribly interested in revisionist histories questioning his lifestyle or his administrative judgment. Criticisms of his actions don’t seem to spoil the “heart” that he brought to civic life.

I take all these signs as indications that ultimately politics is not a matter of administration as much as care, and I’m tempted to think that politics could be re-enchanted if we could make the shift from the mechanics of the system to giving everyone a bed, main-
taining the family of humankind, and tending our cemeteries. The process of politics often gets in the way of its essential vision and charge: the care of citizens. Politicians seem to believe that they should be tough-minded administrators and hide their emotions of empathy and care.

These alternative ideas about beds and cemeteries, too, should not be taken literally, but they do suggest an attitude that could be the foundation of political action. Our current idea of politics as bureaucracy, administration, and lawmaking is what Jungian psychology labels an animus activity, where thought, judgment, and heroics are central. Politics could also be imagined as work of the anima, with emphasis on imagination, caretaking, and depth of vision. Imagine, for example, a political science department in a university shifting its attention to soul issues, leaving behind its critical, argumentative, and analytical style, becoming interested in the myth and poetry of political language, the emotional needs of citizens, and the role of art and beauty in the life of the culture. The politician courageous enough to explore the soul of this activity might also discover its depth and spiritual dimensions.

The Religion of Politics

It's no accident that one of the principal roles of the politician is to be a representative at state funerals and memorial services. In many traditional societies, care of the dead is the primary duty we have toward one another, and funeral rites are usually elaborate and time-consuming. The leave-taking by death of a person from the community is felt as a major political act, and the period of mourning a necessary rite for dealing with the disturbing mystery of death.

Typical of modern times, we have vestiges of powerful funeral rites, like flying the flag half-staff across the country, proclaiming a holiday or holy day for the deceased person, and laying the body in state for visitation and contemplation. The funeral of John F. Kennedy was a rare instance when the nation became emotionally involved in highly symbolic and imagistic rites of a slain president, allowing business as usual to be temporarily forgotten.

Politicians are called to a certain kind of priesthood for the com-
munity, not only presiding at funeral rites but also gathering the people together for other civic religious rituals, such as receiving foreign heads of state with pageantry, giving speeches in parks and at parades on holidays, and even throwing out the first baseball of the season. These and other ritual roles are usually eclipsed by politicians' assumed administrative duties, but the soul is more directly addressed by them than by the running of bureaucracy.

In many traditional societies, the political head is also a spiritual leader, and in others the secular leader is limited by ancient religious teachings. We Americans pride ourselves on separating church and state, rightly worried that citizens may lose freedoms if politicians mix their religious beliefs with their political agendas. But as a result we have created a wholly secular state that can't truly govern a people, because its activities ignore the needs of the soul and play out as if a human community were a mere aggregate of inanimate bodies. How could we run a country according to the most recent reckoning of pollsters unless we considered citizens as mere numbers?

Maintaining a basic religious outlook on life with a corresponding set of values does not necessarily lead to the imposing of a belief system on others. If we could distinguish between a basic religious attitude and a system of beliefs, we might bring to our civic lives a spirit of reverence, an acknowledgment of mystery, and an appreciation for ritual, all in an atmosphere of tolerance. In our desire to preserve a secular state and freedom of worship, we often prohibit expressions of religion in public life, whereas it is the imposition of belief and not a religious sensibility in general that is a threat to freedom.

Quite properly we value the secular life, but we often confuse that, too, with its anxious, defensive, and generally neurotic relative, secularism. The religious life and the secular live hand in hand; they support each other. Religion can teach us how to appreciate everyday life with depth and reverence, while commitment to a secular lifestyle can keep religious expression from excessively dominating daily life.

But secularism arises from a fear of religion. It's a defensive insistence that religion remain on the sidelines, if it is in the picture at all. In a secularistic world, we have few resources for values, vision,
and civic order, while in a theocracy we haven't freedom to explore values and create a satisfying secular life. The alternative is to maintain a harmony of the secular and the religious, protecting society from the dangers of religious intolerance and the imposition of belief.

Political Narcissism

I recall attending a lecture given at the University of Chicago many years ago by a prominent historian and political adviser. The audience was an interdenominational group of theology students. We were stunned to hear the leitmotif of this man's talk—the "national interest." We asked him: "What about international interests? What about the legitimate needs of individuals?"

"Of course other countries have valid concerns, and we work with them and for them," he said, "but our representatives are elected to serve the national interest before all else."

Not a philosophy, but a religion of nationalism prevents some political leaders from seeing their role as caretakers of the family of humankind. From a psychological perspective, nationalism is an emotional complex, a whole set of feelings, thoughts, and attitudes that have not been woven into a person's thoughtful and dispassionate philosophy but rather operate autonomously, without a human, and therefore humane, context. We accept that the "national interest" is the prime directive of our politicians, without having examined the implications. What if I said that the great imperative of my life was my own interest, or my family's? The narcissism and immaturity in my position would be clear.

Link this self-focused attitude with the widespread problem of politicians serving their own constituencies at the price of others, falling into myriad forms of corruption on behalf of their own interests, and giving up basic forms of morality in order to preserve their positions, and we see to what extent narcissism interferes with "deep politics," or the soul aspects of the political enterprise.

Narcissism is always a failure in love, the inability to love oneself and one's immediate world. The comfort with oneself that is a prerequisite for any genuine service to others is symptomatically elusive and unattainable. Paradoxically, narcissism can be cured only when
individuals find themselves in community, for the soul is incomplete when experienced only through an individual life. Care of the soul can be accomplished finally only through politics, and those many politicians who demonstrate the narcissistic neurosis in their behavior can find their true role only when their anxiety about caring for themselves is relieved by their full surrender to community.

When a politician has not been truly initiated into the role, or when his or her personal psychology lacks maturity, the necessary elements in the political process might well appear symptomatically. For instance, instead of having an honest sense of community, the politician may hide disingenuously behind claims of speaking for constituents. Or instead of narcissistic needs being fulfilled in a deep feeling of community service, they may be expressed in embezzlement—using the community’s money and services for personal gain and comfort.

If we lived in an enchanted world, where we realized that the spirit of the community is the ultimate governor, then we would be less likely to confuse the power of the office with personal, narcissistic aggrandizement. It makes sense that a culture that grants personality only to human persons is going to personalize political positions and be corrupt from the outset. The ancient Greeks knew that they were held together as a community by a divine spirit, or by a number of spirits, but we think government is a human endeavor, and so of necessity we are plagued with narcissistic politics.

We are all politicians to some degree. We all live in community, and we all participate in the community’s life. If our politics is ever to become re-enchanted, we all have to discover the holy, sacred, and spiritual dimensions of community life. When we give away the power to shape our communities to certain individuals we call politicians, and ourselves enjoy a life of vicarious politics, then we are contributing to the disenchantment of the world. Politics can work at a deep level only when all the people are engaged in its spirit and live fully aware that they are community beings. One reason politicians cannot bear the weight of their responsibility and privilege is that they carry too much of the political life of a city, county, or nation. Leaders lead, they don’t do all the work themselves.

We all become political when we realize that our lives are not bounded by the perimeters of self, family, and home, and when we
feel and act from that realization. A person is more than an individual, more than a self. A person is one whose vision and identity include various communities—neighborhood, town, region, nation, and world. Paradoxically, we may gain a stronger sense of self when we extend ourselves generously and courageously into our community, when we exercise our political nature. As anyone who has served community knows, that extension of oneself can be thrilling. Community makes the heart come alive and in that particular way brings charm and deep satisfaction to a person’s life.

Not only can politics be enchanting—an almost absurd notion in modern life—it can be one of the most enchanting aspects of life. Recall the essence of enchantment as I have been attempting to define it: the transhuman voice or music rising from deep within nature or culture that seizes us with awe and spellbinding pleasure. Now recall moments in life when the community spirit was so strong that for a moment at least you felt utter belonging, a profound sense of home, a release from loneliness, and a reason for going on. This enchanting realization lies at the heart of politics.

Or recall a visit to a great city and the feeling of vitality and the variety of life that the place evoked. Visit an unfamiliar country and become absorbed in the ways people do things, the turns of phrase they use in daily speech, the food that is available in markets and restaurants, the sights to see. Politics involves the care and tending of all this rich soul life, and in a certain way a politician is the therapist of a community—"therapist" meaning one who offers care and tending.

Why does a person feel called to be a politician? Ideally such a call comes from a sensitivity to the rich gifts and potentialities of a region or a nation and to the citizens who for one reason or another are deprived of those gifts and potentialities. In all forms of care, we give attention both to sustaining the good life that lies before us and doing what we can to give it to everyone.

By definition, a politician’s life is dedicated wholly to community, and his or her calling to community bears signs of soul in its eccentricity and exaggeratedness. Gandhi is an example of a supreme politician who found himself—his destiny, his gifts, and his powers—as he entered more fully into community. Martin Luther King, Jr., is sometimes criticized for personal deviations, yet
he gave us a rare example of how to be political by becoming increasingly identified with community and increasingly expressive as an individual. Of course, he had the advantage of having a spiritual understanding of his political life.

**Ecological Politics**

Our very words “civil” and “political” invite us through their histories to imagine politics as dealing with death as much as life, home as well as the world, and so the political life is essentially an ecological one—eliciting and caring for a profound sense of home. It is not primarily a materialistic role, although politicians easily become caught up in finance and projects. Nor is it a moralistic role, but rather a moral one. Politicians have great power to set the ethical and visionary tone of a people, and so it is clear that a real politician would have to have both deep wisdom and the skill to get things done in the world. As the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu says of a good ruler: “In tranquility he becomes a sage, and in activity he becomes a king.”

Enchanted politics requires both practical skill and personal wisdom. We think a person is ready and qualified to be a political leader when he or she has received a high level of education, often a law degree, and has had experience in various government positions. But we have no way of educating for “tranquility” and sagacity. The ways of the Tibetans, for instance, seem strange to us. They look for signs indicating a child who might be the reincarnated Dalai Lama. Their method is an enchanted one and speaks to the need for an eternal dimension in serious political leadership. The Hopi have a similar method. It was known to the people before he was born that their great leader Lololma would be a certain boy ordained to become a chief. His name as chief means Many Beautiful Colors—his godmother was a member of the Butterfly clan. Such rites and “illogical” ways of finding political leadership evoke the element of enchantment, which takes politics out of the purely pragmatic, materialistic realm, to speak to the soul of a community.

Of course, modern societies are never going to go looking for obscure signs of future reincarnated leaders, but the gulf between
the traditional and modern approaches tells us how far we have strayed from an enchanted way of being in community, and I believe it gives us a hint as to why our political systems are so often ineffective: They have no inherent, deeply spiritual dimension. We would have to have a radical change of attitude to move closer to the Tibetan and Hopi ways of spiritualizing politics, but if we do not think too literally about such things, there may be ways consonant with what we consider intelligent and practical to re-enchant politics along these lines.

One way, the usual first step in any soul care, would be to take a long look at things that now stand in the way of enchantment. We might reflect on our philosophy of life that divides the sacred and the secular so starkly. We might re-evaluate the place of rituals, old buildings, and our use of public language. We might seriously think about our own collective psychology: our tendency to be defensive, narcissistic, and controlling in our public posture. And we might rediscover the importance of beauty at all levels of public life. Is it too much to expect the polis person, the politician, to safeguard the soul’s need for beauty?

The rare politician who can be filled with enthusiasm and personality without getting caught in the neurosis of self-aggrandizement, the person of genuine wisdom and tranquility of heart, will stand far above colleagues in stature and achievement and enjoy the deserved honor of the people. Just by being a public person with honesty and sagacity, this individual in his or her own person would contribute greatly to the re-enchantment of community life; a public person can be overwhelmingly enchanting, and maybe our current “cult of celebrity” is our way of reaching for this kind of enchantment and expresses our need for political leadership in enchantment.

When we all, leaders and participants in community, discover the sheer joy of creating a way of life that serves families, ennobles work, and fosters genuine communal spirit, then we will begin to touch upon the sacredness that lies in the simple word polis, which is not just a city defined in square miles, income, or population, but a spirit that arises when people live together creatively.