

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Democracy Under Threat”

Rev. Sam Trumbore October 18, 2020

Opening Words

Is anyone feeling a little stressed as the election approaches? I do! I attended a training on Wednesday about heading to demonstrate in the streets across the nation if it appears as if one side is trying to steal the election. I anticipate we may be facing a scary November. Our electoral process may be on the line.

Let us, for the moment, though, keep calm and carry on with some wise words from the Roosevelts:

From Franklin:

"Let us never forget that government is ourselves and not an alien power over us. The ultimate rulers of our democracy are not a President and senators and congressmen and government officials, but the voters of this country."

From Eleanor:

"You have to accept whatever comes, and, the only important thing is: that you meet it with courage and with the best that you have to give."

Readings

Trump's words on the election and accepting the outcome:

August 20 rally: "... they're trying to steal the election, and everybody knows that. Because the only way they're going to win is by a rigged election," he said.

September 13 rally: "And 52 days from now we're going to win Nevada, and we're going to win four more years in the White House. And then after that, we'll negotiate, right? Because we're probably -- based on the way we were treated -- we are probably entitled to another four after that," he said.

September 23 news conference: "Well, we're going to have to see what happens. You know that. I've been complaining very strongly about the ballots. And the ballots are a disaster ... We want to have -- get rid of the ballots and you'll have a very trans- -- we'll have a very peaceful -- there won't be a transfer, frankly; there'll be a continuation. The ballots are out of control. You know it," he said.

From the First Presidential Debate:

Chris Wallace: (01:09:18)

Vice President Biden, final question for you. Will you urge your supporters to stay calm while the vote is counted? And will you pledge not to declare victory until the election is independently certified?

Vice President Joe Biden: (01:09:30)

Yes. And here's the deal. We count the ballots, as you pointed out. Some of these ballots in some states can't even be opened until election day. And if there's thousands of ballots, it's going to take time to do it ... The fact is, I will accept it, and he will too. You know why? Because once the winner is declared after all the ballots are counted, all the votes are counted, that'll be the end of it. That'll be the end of it. And if it's me, in fact, fine. If it's not me, I'll support the outcome.

Spoken Meditation

Here are [some questions from the Greater Good](#) organization in Berkeley to help you cope with the stress of this election season.

Let us turn inward to reflect on these eight questions:

1. **What's happening in my body and mind today?** Consider whether the election is disrupting your ability to sleep, to concentrate and intrudes into your thinking causing anxiety symptoms like pressure in the chest or breathlessness. Name the feelings and emotions.
2. **If I'm feeling distress, what can I do to soothe myself?** Strategies like taking three long, slow, deep breaths. Putting a hand on the heart. And using meditation to calm the mind.
3. **Am I getting enough good news?** Most news, feeds our negativity bias. Reversing that trend needs positive effort.
4. **When do I feel good about the election?** There are so many people doing such good things right now to ensure the election is free and fair and everyone who can vote will be able to vote. Look for the moral elevation that comes from seeing people engage in courageous acts.
5. **What am I grateful for today?** Robert Emmons writes: "In the face of demoralization, gratitude has the power to energize. In the face of brokenness, gratitude has the power to heal. In the face of despair, gratitude has the power to bring hope."
6. **How can I connect with other people?** You're in the right place to do that!
7. **Considering this election, what are some new ways I can use my special skills or talents to make a difference in the broader world?**
8. **What future would I like to see—and what steps am I taking today to make the future happen?**

Sermon

A low point of our Democracy was watching President Trump bully Vice President Joe Biden in the first and I hope the only Presidential Debate. There is no point to having a debate if Trump will not

let Biden speak and make his case to the American people without being interrupted. So much of what is wrong with our country today was on display in the President's behavior.

For many of us, the most sobering moment of that wretched evening was hearing Trump say that it wouldn't be possible that he could lose the election. If he lost, it could **only** be due to election fraud. I'd flip that comment, as is true for so much of what he says, the **ONLY** way he can win is through election fraud.

I thought, after the Bush / Gore election of 2000, that turned on hanging chads in Florida as you might remember, we fixed voting. Each state went through an exhaustive process of evaluating their election systems and updated them. We ought to be engaged in an election quite free of election fraud. There is no credible evidence that absentee voting will be a problem. Yes, there will be minor anomalies as there always are. Like the Republican voting fraud Leslie McCrae Dowless Jr perpetrated in North Carolina in 2018.

The **real** voting fraud is happening in states with Republican legislatures. They are driving fraudulent voter purges, the closing of polling locations and discriminatory voter ID laws. All a direct result of overturning the 1965 voting rights Act because of the 2013 Shelby County v. Holder Supreme Court Case.

Let us remember how short a period we've had **anything close** to voting rights. Before 1965, Black voters faced heavy discrimination when they tried to register to vote. White women didn't get the vote until 1920. We had to fight a Civil War to end slavery and the 3/5ths provision that gave the South a great deal of influence in the election process and in Congress. Between 1965 and 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan, we had a **little** taste of democracy.

Democracy is often unfair and messy. Thankfully, our founders did build in the concept of separation of powers. And the desire to undermine that separation is strong. Trump couldn't get **anything** done without Mitch McConnell. Mitch couldn't be effective without the discipline that began with Newt Gingrich. Newt's power politics and voting as a block gained the Republicans a new kind of power they hadn't had before. He became the power broker and all the negotiations had to go through him. (Something we've lots of experience with here with the three men in a room of past New York State budget negotiations) Ever since, the Republicans and Democrats regularly vote as blocks. And we've been unable to move critical legislation, for example on Immigration reform, ever since.

While I'm terrified of a second Trump term, I'm less worried about Trump being able to consolidate the power needed to be a fascist dictator. He still needs congress to pass bills and budgets. There are limits to his executive power. But more important, while he has a strong base, it is weakening. He does little to expand it and tends to foolishly alienate people – for example the comments calling those who died in war, “losers and suckers.” That isn't going to earn him any friends. The Republican Senators who loathe him, only follow him because it is in their self-interest. Now that they have gotten a Conservative Supreme Court, expect less fealty. They will act to stop any power grab that goes against those interests and will easily find Democrats who will join them.

What Trump has done is expose just how vulnerable our democracy is to an autocratic takeover by someone much more skilled at it than Trump. Trump doesn't have the discipline or the social skills.

Another popular President elected in the future will have Trump's playbook as a reference for how to manipulate our democracy and consolidate even more power.

We've known it for a while – the Executive Branch has too much power. Congress passes complex legislation but leaves the details to regulators that they don't want their fingerprints on. That gives the Executive branch the power to undermine it in the regulatory process by not doing much to enforce the laws passed. Some of us were happy Obama could deliver a lot through executive action on existing laws and regulations.

We see now how vulnerable those changes were as Trump systematically reverses every single one.

Part of the problem has been legislative. Obama and Trump can't get legislation passed because of the Filibuster rule in the Senate. On the positive side that allows the minority to have some power to prevent themselves from being steamrolled by the majority. Yet the result is a kind of congressional gridlock when it comes to controversial yet critically important legislation unmoved year after year.

There is a deeper reason for that gridlock that comes from the way we apportion districts and vote in primaries. In districts or states, a representative may have a secure seat because their party has a majority. The danger for them isn't the general election, it is the primary. They might be unseated in a primary by a challenger from their own party. What we are seeing is incumbents are most vulnerable to being unseated by someone who is more to the right or more to the left of them. This is exacerbating the ideological split of who gets elected. And if the threat to an incumbent comes in this form, they are far less likely to be rewarded by their party constituents for reaching across the aisle and working together. Ideology defeats cooperation.

The polarization of the electorate drives this movement away from the center zone where political deals are possible. Deals where not everyone gets what they want but bills get passed and the people's business gets done. One critical force driving that polarization is the rapid pace of technological change.

When we step back on occasion and see how much has changed, it boggles the mind. Thirteen years ago, the iPhone was introduced. Think how much has changed now that most of us are carrying around such amazing computing power in our pockets and purses. I typed my papers on a typewriter in college. I'm not sure how I wrote a sermon without being able to quickly Google a fact or check a reference through the vast databases available to me. Shopping and reading have changed – I don't listen to the radio anymore or watch television news. Today, everything comes through my phone.

And one revolutionary technology that threatens democracy the most is social media like Facebook and Twitter. We couldn't have Trump as President without Twitter. Twitter allows him to build and have unmediated contact with a fan base that follows every movement of his ego. He couldn't have been elected without the help of Russian social media interference in the 2016 election.

One of the greatest threats to democracy is unregulated social media that permits the propagation of falsehood, character assassination, propaganda, and lies. This only can happen because of section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 that must be repealed. Section 230, written

before the existence of social media, protects social networks from being sued. The abuse permitted by this law is one of the major forces of polarization and division.

Much has been made of our ability to occupy media bubbles and only get news, too often false news, from the sources that we agree with. The speed at which lies can spread and the ability to create ecosystems of distortion and deception can create the illusion of accuracy. Anyone vulnerable to conspiracy thinking will find so many opportunities to forage, I'm afraid they may become lost to healthy society. This dark web is populated by anti-social spiders like Alex Jones of Infowars happy to take your money to support your habit of listening to seductive, toxic fantasy.

This is such a sad situation for those of us, even ten years ago, who thought social media would be the source of liberation for oppressed peoples. The Arab Spring was probably the highpoint of such optimism. But those hopes crashed once the dictators learned how to operate the levers. They learned how to recruit and manipulate their supporters against their enemies. They have been turning it to their advantage ever since. And Facebook has realized there is money to be made by stirring up people's passions and hating on each other.

What Facebook and Twitter latch onto, and Trump has exploited in building his base are dramatic changes driven by technology that are disrupting our way of life. Yes, part of globalization was and is exporting jobs overseas into cheaper labor markets. But many of those jobs don't exist anymore because of automation, even in the countries like China, Korea and Vietnam. The automation of customer service calls with voice recognition means fewer people are needed in call centers in India. Automation tools for drafting means fewer draftsmen.

And more is coming. Driverless cars and trucks will take away one of the few high paying semiskilled jobs that doesn't require more than high school education. We peaked producing fossil fuel in 2018. With electric vehicles, wind, wave and solar power generation, we'll need fewer and fewer miners and energy workers.

The next tech revolution will be bio-tech as we get better and better at redesigning DNA. Not sure what effect that will have, but I doubt it is going to make health care any cheaper.

The greatest challenge is climate change. That will drive the movement of people to our borders. That will drive movement inside our borders as people's communities can no longer support human life or food production and their water disappears.

These are existential threats to a pluralistic democracy that we have yet to face. And building a wall at the border isn't going to help.

There is no way to look backwards into the past for solutions to these threats. I haven't begun to list other threats to our way of life like drones and suppression of civil liberties and human rights. Making America look like the 1950's can't be done. There is already too much carbon dioxide in the air for that. We are facing enormous upheavals in our way of life coming much faster than we're ready. These challenges will require a strong democratic system to protect us from tyranny.

And that isn't the direction we're going right now.

I'm going to pause here. Next Sunday, I'm going to discuss the direction we *need to go* to face the challenges ahead using, our Unitarian Universalist values to chart the path.

Prayer of Affirmation

[Let America Be America Again](#) (abridged) by Langston Hughes

Let America be America again.
 Let it be the dream it used to be.
 Let it be the pioneer on the plain
 Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be *the dream* the dreamers dreamed—
 Let it be that *great strong land* of love
 Where *never kings connive* nor tyrants scheme
 That any man *be crushed* by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
 Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
 But opportunity is real, and life is free,
 Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
 Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.") ...

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
 I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
 I am the red man driven from the land,
 I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
 I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
 I am the worker sold to the machine.
 I am the Negro, servant to you all.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
 In the Old World while still a serf of kings,
 Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,
 That even yet its mighty daring sings
 The millions who have nothing for our pay—
 Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—
 The land that *never* has been yet—

And yet *must be*—the land where *every* man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—
Who *made* America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!