

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“What Democracy Looks Like”

Rev. Sam Trumbore October 25, 2020

Opening Words

The election a little over a week away. The candidates are barnstorming the swing states and making their last minute pitches. Hard to imagine there are undecided voters out there, but I know there are. Millions have already voted by mail and in person. I saw long lines outside an early voting location at the Lutheran church in Delmar on Saturday.

I'm ready for this election to be over. I dearly hope it **will be over** by November 4th. I know many of us will be turning out for demonstrations on November 4th if there are problems and a refusal to accept the results.

Today let us step back from the electoral process and consider democracy itself today. What do we want our democracy to look like? I believe Unitarian Universalists have something to say about that.

Readings

Quotes on Democracy and Covenant

As Unitarian Universalists, we celebrate the inherent worth and dignity of every person and seek to build a peaceful, just, and compassionate society. At the heart of our faith, therefore, is a commitment to democracy—not only as a form of government but as a moral value that lifts our lives beyond the self-centered and mundane and gives meaning to our existence.

~ “Elevator speech” published in UU World

Unitarian Universalist congregations offer unique examples of covenantal communities, where the authority over various aspects of the community is governed by agreements of relationship rather than brokering of power.

~ Rev. Dr. Michael Schuler

Our proposed congregational covenant begins with this Introduction:

Our ‘living tradition’ calls us to be in covenant. For Unitarian Universalists, a congregational covenant reflects our aspirations and commitments to one another and to ourselves. In a covenantal community, each of us is empowered and has the responsibility to help one another as we seek to create a loving, supportive, and affirming community in which to grow in spirit and service.

As a congregation with respect for our past and commitment to the future,
 we draw from the depth and power of our hearts and minds,
 guided by our Unitarian Universalist principles, to serve our mission and vision.

We celebrate the diversity of our identities and experiences,
and foster a culture of appreciation, inspiration, and kindness.

We honor both the strength of the collective and uniqueness of the individual,
willing to support and challenge each other with love and compassion.

We entrust ourselves to each other in beloved community,
to embolden personal and congregational growth and transformation.

Spoken Meditation

I invite us now into a meditation on some of the words and phrases in this covenant proposal. The Covenant Team who developed this proposal put a lot of time and energy into crafting this language. These words are charged with meaning.

Hear each phrase, savor it, ponder it,
and watch for what feelings and emotions arise as you hear it:

- Respect for our past
- Commitment to the future
- Depth, power, hearts, minds
- Diversity of our identities
- Culture of appreciation, inspiration, kindness
- Support and challenge
- Love and compassion
- Entrust ourselves
- Beloved Community
- Embolden
- Growth and transformation

Sermon

Churchill, [quoting another predecessor](#), said:

Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed **it has been said** that democracy is the *worst* form of Government *except* for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time...

As I outlined briefly in last week's service, our democracy is getting one of its most severe tests in recent memory. Many of us are saying to ourselves, "This *isn't* what democracy *should* look like."

The struggle for power is always a rough and tumble process. The stakes are high and people's lives and livelihoods hang in the balance. Yet what distinguishes a democratic approach is the reliance on words to resolve differences rather than fists. We are a nation of laws. Words govern the actions of the enforcement arms of government *not* autocratic whim. We rely on our courts to be the final authority rather than who has the biggest gun.

Or at least that's the theory.

What has been challenging about this President is his *unwillingness* to be bound by any traditions, customs, habits, or authority beyond his own impulse. He has ALL the answers and, if the legislative branch and the judicial branch would just get out of his way, he could order what he thinks is right for his constituency. You're either a loyal foot soldier willing to take those orders or a loathsome enemy who must be removed or destroyed. There is no middle ground.

What this President has helped many of us recognize is *the need to make explicit* what has been somewhat implicit about what we want in a democracy.

Our Unitarian Universalist values found in our Purposes and Principles provide a strong base for what is implicit in American Democracy.

Our religious tradition is the repository of these precious values that evolved alongside the growth and development of our nation.

Implicit in the right to vote is the assumption of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Being entrusted with the ability to elect our leaders assumes each of us has a capacity for discernment. Each adult is granted the ability to influence which candidate will govern us. Not everyone exercises this trust to its full potential, of course. Not enough people study each candidate carefully and review their policies and promises. Many dishonor this public trust by not paying *any* attention to the issues of the day and not voting. But enough do participate to hold those in public office accountable. There is always the threat that the people will rise up and throw the bums out.

Once in office, we expect, even demand, that they conduct themselves following our second principle, valuing justice, equity and compassion as they do the people's business. Whether you are a Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Working Families, or Green Party affiliate, you want our elected officials to be fair, change systems of inequality, and compassionately help those who are disadvantaged by their life circumstances.

Unfortunately, one of the built-in flaws of democracy is the ability of the majority to oppress the minority. When the minority and majority flip back and forth, there is a tendency for tolerance and moderation to develop. But in the case of *permanent marginalized minorities*, for example around race, identity, gender expression and sexual orientation, these folks are at risk for tyranny. Unitarian Universalism says no. It argues for *acceptance* in our third principle and *the right of conscience* in our fifth principle. We should not be bound by laws that violate our identity and corrupt our deeply held personal values and beliefs.

Our sixth principle goes further when it advocates for world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. Implicit in this principle, as in our others, is the valuing of diversity. No matter who you are, where you live, what your racial, genetic, ethnic, cultural or religious background and heritage, you deserve acceptance and inclusion too. Everyone deserves peace, liberty and justice.

And finally, our seventh principle extends the respect we offer each other to all of life on this planet. We cannot govern ourselves without considering the effects of our actions on the environment and the sustainability of life on this planet. We must be stewards of the bounty of the earth not the consumers and destroyers of the earth's ability to support life.

Our congregation doesn't just promote these values in our society, we practice them in our congregation. Our members are the deciders, electing our officers, calling ministers, raising the money for our operations, and approving our yearly budget. We take public positions on issues through congregational vote.

There is a deeper way we strive to actualize democracy. We strive to build a healthy, affirming, welcoming community that goes further than majority/minority division. We want to go beyond tolerating our differences to appreciating and celebrating them. Rather than remaining in discomfort and fear about differences, we strive to be curious and open to learning about them, practicing acceptance as much as possible. Through curiosity and learning we can then encourage each other's growth and development.

Does that sound easy to do? No it isn't. For almost all of us, it is hard always to welcome difference with curiosity, learning and acceptance. We all have opinions and biases that intrude and limit our ability to listen and respond. Few of us can listen attentively and thoughtfully to Rachel Maddow and Sam Harris as well as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. Bonus points for liberals if they can do it with this President.

To grow and develop in this area we need social tools to help. *This* is one of the reasons we've developed a congregational covenant. The covenant puts into words our implicit aspirations for how we want to be together. It tells those new to our congregation our culture of relationship and communication. And when we deviate from it, it serves as a reminder of who we are striving to become.

Another way we are aspiring to build a stronger community here is getting better at navigating conflict. Nationally, during the last four years, we see the failure of working through conflict around diversity in broad relief. The President has made hostility to immigrants his signature issue. Rather than address the issues that bring people to our borders, just build a wall to keep them out. Whether Islamophobia, or state rejection of Medicaid funding or the Affordable Care Act, or support for ICE raids, to racism and homophobia, many Americans resist the idea of a pluralistic democracy.

It is important for us to pause here and have a little humility. Encountering difference isn't easy and often in surprising ways. I hear about congregations that are making good progress on increasing diversity. I was interested to learn that conflict goes up as well. Implicit norms of the congregation get surfaced and challenged. Unitarian Universalists have used unspoken social norms rather than creeds to say who is in and who is out. Confronting them makes people uncomfortable – as well it should.

With a potential covenant explicitly defining our aspirations, we need to get skilled at working through the rough patches, the conflicts that develop when our reality doesn't match our aspirations. My hope is we see this as a positive not a negative. The mismatch is an opportunity for systemic change. Those changes will assist our congregation to grow and develop into those aspirations.

Rather than focus on *individual* transgressions, let us focus on *our implicit culture* as a congregation. Let us not get distracted by seeking to identify who is right and who is wrong. The goal needs to be building stronger community that animates our values and principles. Each conflict, then, makes us stronger and more vibrant rather than dividing and weakening us. Each conflict is an opportunity for growth and development to be welcomed rather than feared.

To navigate conflict well, we need social tools. A powerful tool in my toolbox comes from Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication methods. The powerful element of the tool is recognizing all of us are driven by our needs. We feel good when our needs are getting met. We don't feel great when our needs are not getting met. What is hidden in plain site about needs is their universal quality. I can make a list of needs like, food, shelter, autonomy, affection, consideration, play, and safety and each one has unconditional value for all of us. Where problems develop is through how we go about getting them met. When I understand the needs that are driving your behavior, I can identify with you and that need that I value too. When that happens, I can authentically connect with you in helping you get that need met. The misery of the world is built on conflicting strategies to get our compelling needs met. Good conflict resolution process uses tools like this to help people connect in their basic humanity and recognize the other's inherent worth and dignity.

Another way to communicate that creates the context for appreciative, respectful communications is the use of non-harming speech. Many of us use language that others experience as harmful and perpetuating systemic oppression. The UU World article about Transgender people was experienced that way a couple of years ago. Clearly there wasn't an intent to harm but harm was the impact of the article. The authors were carriers of systemic oppression without being conscious of it, and even resistant to hearing about it. The systemic approach to resolving this conflict by Susan Frederick Gray was a huge change from 50 years ago when our predominantly male clergy dismissed using gender inclusive language as unnecessary. Attentiveness to learning about and modifying our speech can make a positive difference.

This is an example of what is missing in the daily barrage of abuse flowing through the President's twitter account. You are either a loyal follower deserving high praise or a loser.

What we are practicing in our congregations learning how to better embrace diversity is what will be needed in our larger society as we increasingly become a pluralistic democracy. Those demographic changes are not going to slow down. The toxic stew of hate, deception, exploitation, and dehumanizing speech common in social media needs to be moderated to prevent further polarization.

We've learned by now that anonymous speech on the Internet does much more harm than good. Everyone needs to be accountable for what they post, and the social media platforms need to be accountable for what they propagate. We need prosocial social media platforms that create the positive connections that weaves together the diverse threads of community to demonstrate for all the beauty of human diversity.

Using skillful social tools and using Unitarian Universalist values that affirm the human spirit, we can build a healthier democracy. This work is independent of political philosophy. It is affirmative of the individual and the community. Learning how to work through and embrace difference is the evolutionary task of our times.

Can we accept this challenge? I believe so. As Harry Emerson Fosdick put it, “Democracy is based upon the conviction that there are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people.” In Noam Chomsky’s words: “In this possibly terminal phase of human existence, democracy and freedom are more than just ideals to be valued - they may be essential to survival.”

May we accept the challenge to support the growth and development of American democracy for the good of all.

Prayer of Affirmation

In this time of heightened tension and polarization
 the eyes narrow and the brow furrows
 when we see signs of political opponents in our neighbor’s yard.

The heartrate elevates and the mouth frowns
 when the image of political opponents appear on our screens
 Or their voices cause painful sensations in our ears.

Let us now put politics aside for just this moment
 and remember the humanity of those with whom we disagree.

Can we find a way to both hold our core convictions that drive our choices and
 recognize others have *different* priorities and values.

Can we experience this dissonance without hate but with curiosity and
 discover they share with us *other* priorities and values

Can we put aside our assumptions and expectations and
 find out *who that neighbor really is* in their full humanity?

Can we hold open the possibility that they may change and
 they may change us?

May we hold open the possibility
 that we can learn from and empathize with each other
 that we can influence each other
 that it may be possible for us to love each other
 when right now we can’t even imagine it.

May we find a way to hold open our hearts at least a crack
 for the unexpected to surprise us and
 the Spirit of Life to move in, through and between us.

May it be so! Amen