

The Joy and Risk of Democracy

Rev. Roger Jones ~ July 5, 2015

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #361, Enter, Rejoice and Come In; Happy Birthday (Chapin/Lehar); #1018, Come and Go With Me to that Land. Special organ music by Jeffery Klein of Minneapolis.

Prayer followed by Silence

Spirit of Life and Love, we gather in thanks for the gift of life and the gift of this new day. We hold in our hearts the joys we bring into this place, and the milestones we mark in celebration or in sadness. As we tend our sorrows with gentle care, we extend our care to others now feeling disappointment, loss, fear, or troubles of any kind.

As we examine our lives, we often see a gap that exists between where we aspire to live and where we find ourselves to be, whether as individuals, as communities or as nations. Let us view the tensions of life with tender honesty and clarity. Let us open to understanding and wisdom.

On this Independence Day weekend, many celebrate an American heritage of struggle and vision, through which we have widened the circle of liberty, inclusion, and fairness. Whatever we count our freedoms to be, let us use them as gifts for the enjoyment of life and the healing of the world.

We extend our care beyond these walls to all places of conflict and oppression, and we send our wishes and prayers for peace and freedom and enough to eat to all people in the human family.

Spirit of Life and Love, let us approach the days ahead with spirits open to wisdom and hearts open to compassion. Let us live with courage, and with hope. Blessed be and amen.

Reading 1:

“[Let America Be America Again](#)” poem published in 1935 by Langston Hughes (African American, 1902-67).

Reading 2:

The second reading comes from United States Senator Lindsey Graham’s announcement last month that he was running for President. Speaking in the small South Carolina town where he grew up, the senator said:

There are a lot of so-called “self-made” people in this world. I’m not one of them. My family, friends, neighbors, and my faith picked me up when I was down, believed in me/ when I had doubts. You made me the man I am today. (Graham 2015)

Sermon

The 4th of July holiday stirs thoughts in me about so many things: the freedoms and good fortune I’ve enjoyed, the courage of the founders who declared independence, the people abroad longing to come here to flee persecution or pursue a dream of success. I think also about the practice of democracy.

In Philadelphia, delegates from 13 British colonies came together in a vote of independence from the King, launching our experiment in public participation in decisions affecting our common life. But American democracy was not hatched full and complete in 1776.

Back then, some groups of people could not vote or hold public office. Some could not own property. Some people were the property of others. In an early draft of the Declaration of Independence proposed to the Continental Congress, Thomas Jefferson attacked the British King for bringing slavery to the colonies. Though a slaveholder himself, Jefferson called slavery a “cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty.” Fierce debate ensued about this passage. To win over delegates from two southern colonies and from northern ones that profited from the slave trade, this passage was deleted from the Declaration.

To be sure, the ongoing practice of democracy can correct earlier misdirections, but changing course does not change the past. It cannot return the black lives taken, or the women’s lives suppressed, the Japanese American lives interned in camps, or the many children’s lives marred by hunger and hard labor.

On the other hand, in a democracy, some goals that seem impossible in one era can become law in a later era. They can go from dismissible ideas to debatable ones, to being “the way things are now.” So now women hold political office, serve in

the military and in the clergy. So now lesbian couples and gay couples can get a legal marriage, all across the land. But 30 years ago marriage equality wasn't even a goal of the leading LGBT advocacy organizations.

The Quaker educator and writer Parker J. Palmer explains that to practice democracy, we must acknowledge a “tragic gap”—the gap that “separate[s] *what is* from what could [be] and [what] should be.” (Palmer, 26)

In any setting—nation, city, community organization, congregation—engaging in democracy requires the “courage to inhabit that gap” between where we are and where we could be. We live with discomfort or tension. We risk disappointment.

In a 1935 poem, African American poet Langston Hughes evoked the tension of the tragic gap, the space between his experience and his longing: “America never was America to me, / And yet I swear this oath—/ America will be!”

In Parker Palmer's words, democracy means: “We all depend on one another.” We belong to each other. Even if we'd rather not, we do.

Even when we want to assert our separateness, we all depend on one another—in a nation, a community, or a congregation.

Palmer says it is because of our need for each other that the sad condition of U.S. democracy in recent decades has taken him to the point of heartbreak, taken him into a dark hole of depression.

In coming out of that place, he came to see that he was not alone. The politics of our time, he says, is the “politics of the brokenhearted.” Perhaps a broken-heart epidemic is what leads so many to proclaim: “I don't vote. It doesn't matter, won't change anything.” It breaks *my* heart to hear that, to hear people surrender their power.

It also hurts to hear people condemn a leader as “just another politician. They're all alike. You can't trust 'em.” But I know dedicated public servants, hard working, patriotic people. I trust *them*.

Our times are filled with demonization of political opponents and people with whom we disagree. We fling rage-filled words that do no

honor to words like *debate*, *argument*, or *compromise*.

On top of that, Palmer notes, is the violence of so many policies: denying “urgent human needs” for food, health care, and a home; the mass incarceration of Americans (especially black Americans), a higher percentage of people than in any other country. Our political decisions support wars that do not stop violence but engender more of it. So many of our own people are suffering.

Understandably, there is anger, which can fuel us, and be constructive. In a democracy, anger may reflect our disappointments and passions. But we are living in a time of rage-filled politics. Rage is something else. It relies on “othering” people, demonizing them.

“How dare the President say that!” we hear shrill voices accuse. Or: “The Senator has betrayed America!” Demonizing engenders fear in us, and rage robs us of hope for the future. Palmer says: “Rage is one of the masks that heartbreak wears.” (Palmer, 6)

Of course, when it comes to matters of conviction or identity, passion is to be expected. About matters of survival—your own or that of a group on the margins of society—passion is inevitable. Disagreement and disappointment understandably can bring feelings of anger. This is why Palmer says we need compassion.

We need to accept our disappointments with kindness, and strive to understand where the other person is coming from. Palmer says compassion comes through exchanging our personal stories, by knowing one another.

Learning how to tell our stories, how to know one another, is one reason why this congregation provides education programs for adults as well as children. One example is Reverend Lucy's book discussion class over the summer. The book for August is Parker J. Palmer's book *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. If you'd like to join them, sign up at the Connections table during coffee hour, after a Sunday service.

Parker says his own heart has “broken open.” He is grateful, for with an open heart he can try to look at all of us with compassion. He tries to see the potential in everyone. This compassion can lift his spirits.

He says the way out of despair is for us to develop habits of the heart, so we can see the longing in everyone for a better future, so we can see our shared humanity. In the words of Terry Tempest Williams, “The human heart is the first home of democracy.” (Palmer, before p. 1)

When I look at the disheartening aspects of national politics, I gain hope knowing that we still have personal opportunities to practice democracy. All over this land are places where we can gain the skills to listen and speak, to compromise and reach agreement with others. It doesn't have to be government or a political campaign. It could be an activity club, or a service club, or an arts or civic organization. Local ways of involvement can stretch our hearts. We can learn to live with disagreement and with discomfort. We can learn to live with dignity after setbacks and with compassion amid frustration.

We join a local organization when we feel called by its common purpose. We sense that we can both give of ourselves and gain by our involvement. The more we are involved, the more we can feel the joy of democracy. We depend on each other.

Much of the time this belonging feels warm and reassuring. Belonging to a congregation can be inspiring; belonging to a state or a city can be a cause for pride, as much of the local boosterism and advertising to tourists would remind us.

In the midst of this good feeling, however, when the tensions of democracy arise, it can be confusing. We may be jarred out of our sense of comfort. We may feel disillusioned. What do we do when, into the comfort of our community, disagreement enters – sometimes heated disagreement – which comes from a deeply held conviction or sense of identity?

The presence of diversity is one thing that can jar us out of our comfort zones —diversity of age, opinion, religious language, ethnic identity. Or how about: One family shops at Whole Foods, the other at Wal-Mart! Or: she is a manicurist; *he* is a manuscript curator. In our surprise, tensions arise. Can I inhabit the same space as you? Can we hear the common heart we share?

In an organization, the loss of comfort is not the same thing as the loss of a vote, but it can be jarring. Learning how to live with discomfort or with confusion can be seen as a spiritual practice. Learning to be mindful of tension, to be mindful of our urge to flee tension or to suppress it can be seen as a spiritual practice. Democracy, then, can be appreciated as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

The late political journalist Molly Ivins wrote that to appreciate democracy, you must possess “a certain relish for confusion.” (Palmer, 11) Remembering our sense of humor can get us through. We also can remember the values that called us together in the first place, like a founding declaration, an inspiring mission statement, a congregational covenant, or the vision for a better world.

July 1st marked a new term of office for several elected volunteers who serve this congregation through various leadership groups. They get to practice democracy and leadership month after month, and lead us in practicing democracy. Our board has a covenant, which members recite at every meeting. Our lay leaders and ministers try to accept alternative ideas, and try to relish the confusions of working together. We try to bring clarity when we can--but also to bring patience, forgiveness, and humor when *perfection* is beyond our grasp, which it usually is.

Now, I ask you to imagine the cavernous hall of a convention center, where you might attend a rock concert, but this won't be a concert. Up on a wide stage is a podium, plus chairs for a choir of 200. Hanging off to the sides of the stage are two projection screens, since you can't see a person's face at the podium if you're seated far away. There's a sea of chairs, rows and rows of chairs divided by six or seven wide aisles.

About 4,600 Unitarian Universalists recently gathered in such a meeting hall in Portland, Oregon, for an exercise of democracy. Two dozen of our USS members made the trip up there for the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. GA for short.

In the near future, various members will tell you what they learned and what they brought back to USS from the varied workshops, worship

services, lectures, public witness events, and their personal conversations with UUs from near and far.

GA is part business meeting and part revival meeting. It's a church convention, and a trade-show for spiritual progressives.

Just over a third of those 4,600 people were voting delegates from congregations.

Important business happens in the delegate meetings at GA, decisions that shape the structure and future of our denomination. But what often generate the most heat and excitement are the discussions of social action issues.

At every GA, delegates vote to select three Actions of Immediate Witness. These are statements about a recent and urgent social issue. By approving one, the delegates ask our congregations to pay attention, learn more, and get involved. Early in the week of GA, proponents of many issues carry petitions around the convention center, approaching delegates and asking for their signature. Yet most proposals will not end up on the ballot, but be set aside by the elected volunteers who manage the process. This can be frustrating for those who put their hearts into their proposals.

Of the proposals that end up on the ballot, only three win the status of an Action of Immediate Witness. This year at GA the Youth Caucus proposed an Action to "Support the Black Lives Matter Movement." What is a Youth Caucus? Imagine 275 teenagers deliberating in separate breakout sessions, where they decide to take a position on the issues as one body. During the full GA delegate business sessions in the convention hall, the youth all sit together. When a Youth Caucus member goes to the microphone to address the delegate body, others line up behind them to show solidarity. You can feel the passion among them, no less than the passion among the many delegates who are much older.

In several GA workshops as well as during the floor debate, we learned about the Black Lives Matter Movement. Two years ago it was launched by three young black women after a jury in Florida found George Zimmerman not guilty of murder after he'd shot Trayvon Martin, an unarmed young black man. The movement gained momentum after several police-involved shootings of unarmed men and boys in several other cities. (Wikipedia)

It gained more urgency after a young white man shouting words of racist fear and hatred killed nine black worshippers at a church in South Carolina, and then more urgency after several black churches were burned.

Our Youth Caucus at GA wanted the General Assembly to ask our congregations to stand with "Black-led racial justice organizations" working as part of Black Lives Matter. In summary, this Action of Immediate Witness reads: "The 2015 General Assembly . . . recognizes that the fight for civil rights and equality is as real today as it was decades ago. [It] urges member congregations to [collaborate] with local and national organizations fighting for racial justice against the harsh racist practices many black people are exposed to." (Wiley)

During the debate over this action, and over amendments to it, some older UUs expressed concern. One said: why accept a racial category – black—which was constructed by a racist system? What about the lives of poor whites, the working poor, or the unemployed? What about the lives of indigenous people, robbed of lands by corporate coalmines and oil wells? Younger delegates replied: Of course, all lives matter. But this is about hearing African American families in their grief, their anger and their fear. It's about standing in solidarity with a community in need of hope, in need of allies to bear witness.

Other delegates voiced concern regarding a phrase in the text about prison reform, and moved to amend the language. Younger delegates, including delegates of color, argued for keeping strong language. It's easy to see at General Assembly that most of the ethnic diversity in our denomination comes from our younger adults and our teenage UUs.

A black young woman Unitarian Universalist from Knoxville, Tennessee, is a trainer of progressive activists for the Highlander Center. She had skipped a professional conference, she said, because she wanted to help her faith community respond to this urgent issue. When she came to the delegate microphone, I heard her say, "Don't vote for this if you just want to feel better about yourself."

You could feel the tension and the passion from those who spoke at the PRO microphone and those at the CON microphone, and those who came down to the center microphone to raise questions of procedure.

I worried that our newer and younger UUs might become disillusioned about this faith tradition, for which they clearly have passion and love. In the midst of growing frustration, the Moderator of our General Assembly said, "I think we need some time to breathe." He said that, and then we took some silence. We often sing also when frustrations are high at these meetings.

After more debate, and after the counting of votes by hand all throughout the hall on an amendment, the main motion was approved by an overwhelming majority.

Many people went outside for a brief rally, especially young adults and teenagers. There was joy and relief at a successful vote. Yet joy was merged with a reminder of the tragic gap of our common life, the gap between ideals of equality and the experience of enduring inequities.

Engaging in democracy not only takes acceptance of messiness and confusion, or even relishing in confusion. It requires the courage and the faith to inhabit the gap that exists between where we are and where we wish we were.

Democracy takes both passion and patience. It asks us to live with tension, and stick together. Democracy means that people depend on one another. We belong to each other. So may it be, and so may we live. Amen.

Works Cited

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