

## The End of Democracy?

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### Hymns

America the Beautiful (#241 in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, UUA), Circle Round for Freedom (#155 in *Singing the Living Tradition*), We'll Build a Land (#121 in *SLT*, revised refrain: "Come build a land where all of our kindred....")

### Reading

*American scripture, from the [Declaration of Independence](#), 1776:*

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.<sup>1</sup>

### Sermon

In the United States, most religious traditions follow some form of participatory decision making for at least part of their organizational decisions. Yet our Unitarian Universalist Association has the distinction of listing the *practice of democracy* as an official religious value. On our list of [Unitarian Universalist Principles](#), it's Number 5. We affirm the right of conscience. We promote the use of the

democratic process in our congregations and in society at large. Hence it seems fitting, on this Sunday before Independence Day, to reflect on the health of U.S. American democracy. It seems even more urgent right now, when a new presidential administration counts among its fans many who are avowed opponents of democratic ideals. Such ideals include unity amid pluralism, equality under the law, vigorous debate and honorable disagreement, liberty from coercion by the state, freedom of the press, respect for the separate branches of government, and limits on executive power. Leaders of the so-called "alt-right" movement reject these values, and they are open about it.

One alt-right leader is Stephen K. Bannon, a chief advisor to President Donald Trump. Bannon's goal, he said, is the "deconstruction of the administrative state."<sup>2</sup> By this he means the bureaucracy that puts our laws into action. As with Donald Trump, Bannon did not rise through the ranks of government service, the military, or even the ranks of the Republican Party. At age 63, he came directly from operating Breitbart News, which is not really a news organization. Breitbart rejects any standards of accountable journalism. In pursuit of power, it promotes lies and misunderstanding.

In late January, after he started at the White House, Bannon launched the president's ban on refugees from Syria and on immigrants from five other majority-Muslim countries, even after they had been vetted and approved. Families fleeing violence found themselves desperate and stranded at their airports, or sent home from foreign airports. In widespread shock at that action, many Americans went to airports around this country to protest the ban, and to say "We Welcome You" to families fleeing persecution. Citizens let Congress know they saw the ban as wrong, irrational and cruel. Federal courts blocked the ban as unconstitutional in February. After some revisions, however, another ban has just gone into effect.

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<sup>1</sup> "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," National Archives. Accessed July 1, 2017. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Mensimer, "Steve Bannon Wants to Destroy the Administrative State. Neil Gorsuch Could Be the Key," *Mother Jones*, April 5, 2017. Accessed July 1, 2017. <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/04/steve-bannon-neil-gorsuch-administrative-state-chevron-deference/>

Many of the followers of the alt-right like to sport symbols of fascism, like the Nazi SS insignias.<sup>3</sup> At an alt-right election victory party, people in the crowd made the Nazi salute to shouts of “Hail Trump! Hail Our People! Hail Victory.”<sup>4</sup> These folks believe, as did the Nazis, that the proper leaders of western civilization are white European males. While they come out of a Christian background, some of alt-right leaders are secular. Christianity as it is practiced now is too diverse for them. They feel that Christianity gave up running civilization. Yet the alt-right people keep the worst of the legacy of Christian imperialism, including anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred. They are openly bigoted against people of color and feminists. This goes even for women who speak for the alt-right. They ignore that the agitation of early American feminists is the main reason they have a platform from which they now condemn others.

The ideology of the alt-right movement is clearly articulated by Richard Spencer, a white man in his mid-40s. He is the head of a white-identity think tank in Washington, the National Policy Institute. He founded *Alternative Right*, an online magazine. Spencer believes that white liberal men have decided to “commit civilizational suicide” by giving up their proper place as lords of humanity.<sup>5</sup> These are his words:

To be white is to be a striver, a crusader, an explorer and a conqueror. We build, we produce we go upward.... For us it is conquer or die...[Our] fate is entirely in our hands.... This is the great struggle we are called to. We are not meant to live in shame and weakness and disgrace. We were not meant to beg for moral validation from some of the most despicable creatures ever to populate the planet. We were meant to overcome—overcome all of it.... Because for us, as Europeans, it is only normal again *when we are great again*.<sup>6</sup>

Against his words putting white Europeans at the top of the human hierarchy, let us hear some words of the American founders. The Declaration of Independence says: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

In other words, our founding American document proclaims universal human rights. It is not the declaration of a crusade or conquest, but a promise of equality and freedom for all people. To be sure, U.S. history since the beginning been full of struggles and setbacks. We are still on our way to a full recognition and practice of those human rights. Yet leaders of the alt-right condemn those rights.

There is nothing patriotic about their language or platform. Patriotism celebrates national accomplishments for the benefit of everyone. Patriotism appeals to our sense of shared achievements, aspirations and love of the founding values of this nation.

The Rev. Dr. Gary Dorrien is a professor of theology and social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He says, “Patriots ... want the nation to live up to its ideals, ‘which means asking us to be our best selves.’”<sup>7</sup>

And so we sang earlier today: “America! America! God mend thine ev’ry flaw. Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law!”

What we hear from the alt-right and from the White House right now is not patriotism, but nationalism. Nationalism appeals to grudges and resentments and a sense of exceptionalism rather than a sense of common humanity. It appeals to the lust for victory and revenge.

In U.S. history, leaders from various parties have said their policies and platforms were congruent with American values, and with the U.S. Constitution, no matter which policies they were

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<sup>3</sup> Graeme Wood, “His Kampf,” *The Atlantic*, June 2017, 43. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/his-kampf/524505/>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 49, emphasis mine.

<sup>7</sup> Gary Dorrien, “Saving Democracy,” review of Timothy Snyder’s *On Tyranny*, in *Christian Century*, June 21, 2017, 23 (entire article p. 20-25). Part of this quotation is Dorrien’s quoting of Snyder. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/his-kampf/524505/>

promoting. The scary thing about the alt-right is that they see no need to appeal to democratic values. They think democracy is a failure and should be replaced. It is weak, and we need a strong hand. Donald Trump has promised to be that strong hand. Historian Timothy Snyder says that this “president basically never says he supports democracy. The president has never given any indication that he understands or respects the rule of law.”

In his recent book *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, Snyder compares the words and actions of the current administration to those of several Central and Eastern European countries in the twentieth century, when they became totalitarian states. For example, Soviet and Nazi power grabs took place in times of economic dislocation and fear, using rhetoric that scapegoated certain groups as the source of people’s pain. Democracy and freedom were taken, stolen. Actually, Snyder says, people gave up their freedoms. In fear and perhaps with relief that someone else promised to solve their problems, many people surrendered their values quite willingly. For this reason, Snyder gives us this warning: “Do not obey in advance.”

This piece of advice is one of Snyder’s 20 lessons to live by in these times. He says, if you care about the health of democracy, “Do not obey in advance,” and “Be calm when bad things happen.”<sup>8</sup> Don’t panic and fall into conformity. Don’t give up your values. In 1933 Adolph Hitler was elected democratically as Germany’s chancellor. One month later the Reichstag, or Germany’s parliament building, was destroyed in an arson fire. Civil liberties were suspended, and Nazi-controlled newspapers called the fire a Communist plot. Then the Nazis had Communist Party members of Parliament arrested, thereby giving the Nazis a new majority. This enabled them to take power indefinitely.

Snyder fears that our government leaders would like to exploit a crisis here. I do too.

Whether it’s a financial crash, a terrorist attack, or a made-up story about a plot against the country, the government could jail its critics, take away civil liberties, and suspend elections. For this reason: “Do not obey in advance,” and “Be calm when bad things happen.”

Another of Snyder’s 20 lessons for these times is “Defend Institutions.” Be vigilant in supporting government agencies and the court system. Protect and support independent organizations, especially when they advocate for transparency at any level of government. The stakes may not seem as high when leaders of smaller institutions hide things, but it still is a loss of the transparency we need in a democracy.

Here’s a local example: In May, Sacramento State University’s student newspaper, the *State Hornet*, published a story and graphics about the State Auditor’s report on the discrepancy between the high salaries of University administrators and the pay of other staff at the University, including professors and support staff. A student reporter asked the University for historical data about pay increases for those categories. A spokesperson for the school refused. She said the newspaper would need to file a California Open Records request to get it. The newspaper filed one, but at press time it had received no answer.<sup>9</sup> What a way to treat your own students! They are learning how to be journalists at a public university, and you are supposed to serve *them*.

Of course, when it comes to the news media, it seems everyone has a gripe with some aspect of news coverage, locally or nationally. I often do. Yet complaints and critiques about the press are part of the territory. When you have a free press, it’s messy and people make mistakes. Yet I don’t want the press to get any weaker. The current White House and its allies have lied to the press, refused to answer questions, and dismissed factual revelations as “fake news.” Snyder asserts: “Fascism says that what you or I experience as facts or what reporters [uncover as facts] are [not] relevant. All that

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Editorial, “Tuition increases shouldn’t have to pay for administrative raises,” *The State Hornet*, May 11, 2017.

Accessed July 1, 2017.

<http://statehornet.com/2017/05/editorial-tuition-increase-shouldnt-have-to-pay-for-administrative-raises/>

matters are impressions and emotions and myths.”<sup>10</sup> Richard Spencer, the alt-right leader, has invoked the German word *Lügenpresse* to dismiss independent media. It’s a word the Nazis used under Hitler. It means “lying press.”<sup>11</sup> If we don’t protect the institutions of democracy, how will they protect us?

Among his other lessons for supporting democracy, Snyder urges: “Contribute to good causes.” He adds also that you must get involved in your community. Don’t be isolated. Meet people, face to face. Make small talk. He says, don’t think Facebook is a substitute for knowing people in person. Conversation with flesh and blood neighbors in real spaces takes more effort than connecting in virtual spaces, but it’s important. Let office holders and officials know that you are paying attention, and pay attention.

This is how we embody another of his 20 lessons: “Be patriotic.” Show your love of country or city or state by showing up. It is a paradox of democracy that it gives us the liberty to be left alone, the freedom to not participate in voting, discussing, reading about issues, or keeping an eye on those in office. Yet for its health and survival, democracy *depends* on our participation. Not everybody’s vigilance is necessary all the time, but the more of it we have, the better. Be patriotic.

His final advice for these times is this: “Be as courageous as you can.” During the Republican primaries of 2016, former Republican Governor Mitt Romney made a speech to argue why Trump should not get the nomination. Romney laid out Trump’s failures, lies, and alleged violations of law. Perhaps Romney waited too long to have an impact, or perhaps other party leaders should have shown as much courage to say what they thought as he did.<sup>12</sup>

Yet in the days and months since the election, millions of ordinary people have shown courage. They have shown up together to protect their immigrant neighbors from government force and their Muslim neighbors from harassment and violence. They have shown up for the dignity of

women and their safety. They have shown up to insist on the use of science to debate public policy. Before this year, many of those people had never participated in a protest march, including some folks from this congregation.

Of course, the United States is not the only place where people show courage in defense of democracy. For example, yesterday in Hong Kong, on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hong Kong’s transfer from the U.K. to China, people demonstrated for democracy. Last March in South Korea, ordinary people held candle light vigils on city streets. Night after night they protested the corruption of the president they had elected five years earlier. They had one more vigil as they waited for South Korea’s Supreme Court ruling. Unanimously the judges impeached the president and removed her from office, to the cheering of crowds outside the court.

But in any democracy, not everybody cheers or boos at the same things. In South Korea there is vigorous and ongoing debate on many issues. Among other sights I saw on my recent journey there was an encampment outside the Seoul City Hall. With my phone I sent a picture of the many tents, banners, flags and signs to a Korean friend in Berkeley. He wrote back to me: “Now you are seeing the other end of the spectrum of Korean politics.” These were not the candle light vigil folks. They *liked* the president who had been impeached. In English, one banner said, “Let’s protect our democracy! We must prevent our country from being overthrown by the national assembly, the press, and the [courts]!” Well, I thought, that’s exactly how a democracy is intended to work: with the legislature, courts, and president all held accountable, thanks to a free press and the freedom to assemble and speak out.

Lessons for these times: Do not obey in advance. Stay calm when bad things happen. Defend institutions—and people. Contribute to good causes. Show up, face to face. Be patriotic and pay attention. Be as courageous as you can.

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<sup>10</sup> Gary Dorrien, *op. cit.*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Graeme Wood, *op. cit.*, 49.

<sup>12</sup> “Mitt Romney’s 2016 Anti-Trump Speech,” Wikipedia. Accessed July 1, 2017.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitt\\_Romney%27s\\_2016\\_anti-Trump\\_speech](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitt_Romney%27s_2016_anti-Trump_speech)

Democracy is messy, often tense and contentious, and sometimes quite slow. In this country, it was set up to be this way intentionally, by the Constitution. And even under the Constitution, this nation is not perfect. Democracy never will be. If perfection were its measure, democracy never would have made it this far. I cannot be sure democracy will endure, but I do have faith that it will. Perhaps by our vigilance in these times, we will make it stronger. We will make *this truth* more strongly self-evident: all people, indeed, are created equal.

Democracy needs to be cared for and tended to. We must care for it, even when it fails to embody the best of its potential. Whatever our political party, political opinion, or background, we who value democracy must stay connected, for our sake and for the sake of the generations who will come after us. Stay connected. We can protect the practice of democracy, by practicing democracy. Protect one another, and protect democracy, by being as courageous as we can.

So may it be. Amen.