

Faithful Democracy
Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
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In November of 2004, I embarked on a memorable journey with my son, Sam, who was a HS senior at the time. At the urging of the UU Minister's Association, I signed on as an "Election Protection" volunteer, alongside other ministers, lawyers, social workers and citizen activists like my UU-reared son.

I chose Youngstown, Ohio, in order to tack on a short visit to friends and family in Pittsburgh, and also because there was a need – the location had been earmarked since many of the poor, urban neighborhoods there, populated largely by people of color, were vulnerable to election day shenanigans.

Sam and I rented a car and cruised through a stitched crazy quilt of verdant hill towns in W. Pennsylvania and rusted-out hamlets with ghost buildings running along the highway into Eastern Ohio. Sam took black and white 35mm documentary pictures all during this sojourn that he later curated as a collection for a senior year photography project. He is a professional photographer today.

Once we arrived in Youngstown, we boarded with the minister of the UU church there at the time, the Rev. Susan Frederick-Grey. It was her first settlement and she was bursting with enthusiasm and on fire about voting rights...and she still is. One could discern then the passion she would later bring to her Justice ministry in Phoenix and her role as our current President of the UUA.

After the debacle of the 2000 Presidential election, with its infamous hanging chad and other corruptions, Election Protection.org was born to safeguard fair voting in 2004. (Volunteers for this effort are now called Poll Peacekeepers). Following a day of training, we were ready. At the polls on Election Day, we stood sentry at the door, ready with our flip phones to call the appropriate contacts when irregularities arose. And they did.

"They say my name isn't spelled right." "They say I'm dead." "They say I already voted." "I got this flyer on my door that said voting was postponed to tomorrow, is that true?" It was an eye-opener, but nothing compared to the intrusions and malfeasance we've witnessed since, and especially in last year's election- its run-up and its aftermath.

In 2020, prior to that election, I preached about UU The Vote - a nationwide campaign to mobilize us UUs to vote our faith at the polls. Here's what now UUA President Susan Frederick Grey said about that in 2019 at our General Assembly.

SHOW CLIP HERE of REV. SUSAN FREDERICK GREY

Some folks believe we shouldn't be talking about politics from our pulpits; that it violates the separation of church and state. But that amendment is not about politics, it's about constitutional law. In truth, politics and faith have been woven together from the beginning of civilization itself, and certainly from the founding of Colonial America.

The Native People have always linked their spirituality to their governance and they are inherently democratic (a word that originates, by the way, in Ancient Greece and the principle of *demos* (meaning people) and *kratos* (meaning power or rule) – the rule of the people).

This linkage pertains to us as UUs, as well. John Adams, our second President, one of the framers of our Constitution, the cornerstone of a new nation, was a Unitarian. Yes, we've had our share of barn-burning Brahmin orators, but mostly, we've shown some restraint and decorum.

There are boundaries. In order for us to maintain our non-profit status, I and any other preacher is prohibited from endorsing a candidate from this pulpit. We cannot have candidates speak to us from this pulpit or even in the building. We UUs may show some restraint and respect for boundaries, but this rule hasn't stopped some evangelical pastors, who brazenly submit that they are not just free, but divinely called, to elevate politicians, especially our former President, to Christlike status. This baffles and disturbs me.

The alarming meld of nationalism and evangelical Christianity is front and center at the crassly-named Patriot Church, with its flag-painted roof, in Knoxville, Tennessee. The pastor, Ken Peters, doesn't follow the rules – he promoted Donald Trump from his pulpit and expected his flock to follow suit. Then he marched on the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

He believes mainstream Americans (Liberals especially) “can't stand Christian culture and that Christian Culture is American culture.” These beliefs are increasingly hard to separate from partisan politics. He goes on to say (hold onto your hats), “I think President Trump is a miracle. I think God picked Donald Trump, an imperfect vessel, to be the champion of his people.” It makes one wonder if his flock believes in democracy, or instead, yearns for a narrow theocracy guided by QAnon conspiracy theories and a white, blue-eyed prosperity Jesus who never existed.

Show clip here of evangelical pastors

Despite this perversion of “the word,” at its true heart (Jesus would never have preached like these pastors), religion is about values, about principles, making it detrimental to *avoid* bringing it into the pulpit, especially when your congregants don't affirm a common creed.

Our own 5th principle states: we affirm and promote the right of conscience and the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” When we support the “For the people” voting rights act – and I hope we all will, we are affirming that principle in real time. It is embedded in our faith and it is an expression of our faith.

In his Berry Street address in 1942, during WWII, the Rev. Jacob Trapp noted that democracy is “a dream that springs from the heart, from our longings and aspirations. It involves a faith and sponsors a cause, namely liberation from despotisms. It has its great prophets and poets and it has its martyrs.” And, he emphasized that “the bold vision, the poetry, the vista of possibilities of the religion of democracy is needed by our churches for their spiritual revitalization.” Still true.

The Rev. A Powell Davies, one of our most renowned ministers, who served All Souls Church in DC in the 1950’s, was successful in having the democratic method identified as a nationwide core value of faith. For him, democracy was both a moral aspiration and a saving force for America. (from a sermon by Sue Browning, UU congregation of Rockville, 2016). Still true.

And in November 2004, the day before the election I helped protect, then UUA President William Sinkford (the first person of color to serve in this role) emboldened and encouraged us with these words: “The democratic process is an act of faith: not faith that any one point of view will prevail, but faith that the will of the people will point us toward the Beloved Community. Not only is democracy an act of faith, it is an imperfect process.” Still true.

Thus, as UUs, our faith calls us to oppose the forces that seek to thwart the passage of the “For the People” Voting Rights Act. It calls us to push back against the purging of voter rolls and restrictive Voter ID laws targeting non-binary citizens and people of color. We must be decent and engage our first principle, too – human dignity and democracy go hand in hand.

As the historical record shows, democracy has been a tainted and incremental process from the beginning – at the outset, women, people of color, Native Americans, former slaves, and others without the right to vote, were not included under the billowing, much vaunted, tent of democracy.

Earlier, Andy read Langston Hughes’ opus, “Let America Be America Again,” written in 1935 during the Depression, by one of our most esteemed African American poets. At that juncture, Hughes would not have had the right to vote.

“Let America be America again,” he writes
Let it be the dream it used to be
Let it be the pioneer of the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

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.”

And then the refrain – a lament – “America never was America to me,” he tells us.

Has much changed? Would Hughes redact his lament in 2021? I think not. Would he recognize an America where Jim Crow still impacts democracy? Sadly so. Would he cringe at an America where the term “antifa” which is short for anti-fascist is branded as unpatriotic? I couldn’t say.

There is quite a bit of debate as to whether Langston Hughes was an atheist or an avid and eclectic churchgoer. What he cared about was salvation in the here and now (a very UU concept, actually) for himself, for people of color, for America, and his goal was to articulate our nation’s highest hopes and deepest fears honestly, poetically. I can only speculate how he would answer this question: Is religion good for democracy? I think he would reason that religion can help us access our highest selves and activate them for good, to bend towards justice, to be decent and fair.

In his book, “Why Religion is Good for American Democracy,” Princeton scholar Robert Wuthnow, argues, in a nutshell, that “democracy is an antagonistic enterprise in which we contest one another’s ideas. And religion can contribute to that kind of democracy because it does encourage people to contend with what they truly believe and clarifies the values at stake.” If only our exchanges across beliefs and ideologies could be more stable, more civil, less vitriolic and labelling; more about listening for understanding than agreement. This is a mountain to climb.

You may have noticed the blurb in our e-news the past couple weeks about an organization called Faithful Democracy. It is a multi-faith community of organizations and congregations who share the moral imperative of fixing our democracy. They support a broad array of democracy reforms to create fair, functional, and healthy democratic systems that align more closely with our founding democratic ideals and which are more reflective of our citizenry. The UUA is a signatory organization. Here’s how they describe a faithful democracy:

- A faithful democracy ensures that all voices are heard and have equal access to power structures.
- A faithful democracy takes into account the needs of the most vulnerable, the young and the elderly.
- A faithful democracy balances the common good against special interests.
- A faithful democracy prompts integrity among those who serve and instill trust among the citizenry.

- A faithful democracy fosters a sense of responsibility towards our families, our communities, our nation, and the global community.

I am encouraging you, us, to go to *faithfuldemocracy.us* and sign the voter's covenant. As a congregation, there are many actions we can take. We can organize a Souls to the Polls effort to get folks to voting sites, we can write and send postcards, we can join the work of groups like the League of Women Voters, Move Flagstaff Forward, Together, we will: Northern Arizona, and Stacy Abrams grassroots organization, "Fair Fight," to name just a few.

I ask that you, we, call our representatives tomorrow, prompting a passage of the For the People Voting Rights act. Next week, the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act go to the floor for a test vote. This has been a long battle. On a local level, we can be vigilant and vocal about living wages, housing availability and affordability, and other issues that impact democracy, right here in Flagstaff.

Throughout America, we need to shine a bright spotlight on how Jim Crow and wealth inequality and white privilege and crooked politics and the resultant gerrymandering effect not just people of color or the poor, but all of us striving to live the American dream of true democracy. And this isn't something that just Black preachers should be tasked with talking about. Even so, one black preacher in particular, who is also a Senator, Rev. Raphael Warnock of Georgia, sums things up well and with compelling zeal in this statement from the halls of Congress.

Clip here of Senator (Rev.) Raphael Warnock

As with any expression of faith, we'll need to bring discernment and our whole selves (head, heart, hand and spirit) to the process. And we must authentically participate and grasp that democracy is "not something we have but something we must do." (Parker Palmer)

As we have learned all too well these past five years, democracy is flawed and vulnerable. Yet, I agree with Richard Cohen, writing in the NYT, who proclaims optimistically that "democracy is stubborn. It raises our gaze. It is the system that best enshrines the unshakable human desire to be free."

In another poem called Democracy, written in 1949, Langston Hughes reminds us that,

Democracy will not come
 Today, this year
 Nor ever
 Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own the land.

I tire so of hearing people say,
Let things take their course.
Tomorrow is another day.
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.

I live here, too.
I want freedom
Just as you.

Friends, plant a strong seed with your faithful vote. The Liberty Tree of Democracy depends on it.
Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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