

What if Citizenship Were Voluntary?

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
Rev. Paul Beckel
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The Argument from Intimidation is a confession of intellectual impotence.

Ayn Rand

If you would have your son to walk honorably through the world, you must not attempt to clear the stones from his path, but teach him to walk firmly over them.

Anne Bronte

She is always optimistic and resourceful, a woman who, if cast ashore alone on a desert island, would build a house with a guest room.

Edna Buchanan

Good morning and welcome to BUF, I'm Rev. Paul Beckel. As we light the chalice today let's say together our covenant:

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

I hope you did not feel coerced, just now, into saying the covenant of the Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship. Because an important but unstated aspect of a covenant is that it is voluntary—something we can choose to participate in, or not. Today we're going to talk about making choices about who we are, and *whose* we are. Some of us see ourselves—and wish to be seen—as fiercely independent. Others choose the identity of contributors to—and beneficiaries of—an interdependent society.

Wherever you fit along that spectrum, you probably recognize that there are consequences for your choice. So perhaps, in the New Year, you would like to re-consider, take a different approach, make a move a little bit in one direction or the other, which may then lead you to a different experience of life.

But, to put this into perspective today, let's imagine something more dramatic: What if, in this life, you had to opt in, or opt out, of citizenship? Let's consider the pros and the cons. It's not such a crazy idea, is it? In the Unitarian Universalist tradition we emphasize voluntary association, religious liberty, individual conscience, and personal responsibility. We resist organizational hierarchy and we react defensively to any hint of authoritarian coercion. This country too has thrived on the notion that we are free to assemble and work together, to pool our resources, to organize...OR NOT. Our guest speaker today is me, about 50 years from now, looking back on all that transpired through a fateful time of social transformation when we took

the principles of freedom and responsibility to their logical conclusion. Let's begin with a song on this very theme:

GATHERING SONG

by Rev. Mary Grigolia

1. We have led different lives (3x)...
And we've come to our own conclusions.
2. We have prayed different prayers...
3. We have mourned different deaths...
4. We dreamed different dreams...
5. Let us walk arm in arm...

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

Jenna and the Troublemaker, by Hiawyn Oram

Summary: Jenna is so distressed about her troubles that The Troublemaker takes pity on her, allows her to turn them in...and, allows her to choose from all of the bags of troubles that he has strewn about the world. After looking at some pretty ghastly stuff, she concludes that one particular bag of troubles seems manageable—her own.

RESPONSIVE READING from "Song of the Open Road" by Walt Whitman

#645

Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me.
Henceforth I ask not good fortune –
I myself am good fortune;
I inhale great draughts of space;
The east and the west are mine,
And the north and the south are mine.
All seems beautiful to me;
Whoever you are, come travel with me!
However sweet these laid-up stores –
However convenient this dwelling, we cannot remain here.
However sheltered this port, and however calm these waters
we must not anchor here;
Together! The inducements shall be greater;
We will sail pathless and wild seas;
We will go where winds blow, and waves dash
Onward! To that which is endless, as it is beginningless,
To undergo much, tramps of days, rests of nights,
To see nothing anywhere but what you may reach it and pass it.
To look up or down no road but it stretches and waits for you—
To know the universe itself as a road – as many roads –
as roads for traveling souls.

SPECIAL MUSIC

MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

MESSAGE

The Man without a Country! I was just a boy when I read that American classic. It's probably been four score and seven years since then. Hmm. Maybe you read it yourself? *The Man without a Country?* Perhaps you too were inspired by the historical realism... and felt the patriotic zing of the story, which goes like this: It's about 1810. A young naval officer becomes an unwitting tool in a treasonous plot. At his conviction hearing he angrily, brashly, declares that he'd prefer never to hear of the United States again. And that's exactly the sentence then imposed upon him. He's held in the brig on ships for the rest of his life, passed from one ship to another, never landing then in America, and with each new crew sworn never to mention anything about his home country or its fate for over 50 years. Eventually, of course, he pines away for the U.S.A.

The story was written during the American Civil war. It was intended to promote a greater devotion to national identity. The author, Unitarian clergyman Edward Everett Hale, was a romantic—not unlike the other Unitarians of his era—Whitman, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau—those literary accomplices of the political idealists of that century: Jefferson, Rush, Starr King and so many Unitarians, Universalists and other religious liberals whose quests for political liberty melded with the emerging *American civil religion*—that of freedom and responsibility, intertwined.

If I remember correctly, I read *The Man without a Country* in the 1970's. It was just after Watergate, and the Vietnam War. A precocious boy, I was maybe ten or twelve—too young to be conscious of the tussle that may have already begun haunting me, that war that plays out within every generation: the plaintive childlike longing for home and country...versus the adolescent disappointment and distrust of home and country...and the resulting rebellious determination to go it alone. I was too young to grasp all of that consciously, but I remembered the catchy title of that book. So when the transformation took place—about 40 years later, some time around 2016—some part of me had been thinking about this notion for a long time.

To have no country. Would that be so bad? Sometimes I was not proud of my country. Sometimes I imagined an end to the artificial boundaries of country because I wished to be a citizen of the world.

Those of you who were around in those days probably remember the rhetoric. Candidate Obama's pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright preached, "God Damn America!" He wanted Americans to wake up and notice that, collectively, we were not acting in way that would merit God's blessing. He felt that as a society we had abandoned our responsibility to the poor and the marginalized.

Rival preachers used almost the same rhetoric. Revs. Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Fred Phelps repeatedly pointed to natural disasters, soldiers' deaths and terrorist attacks as signs of God's retribution against the United States for its tolerance of immorality.

And in 2016, well, I was far too young to retire, of course, but still I was attentive to the debates about social security: whether it was moral, whether it was efficient, whether it was sustainable to collect money from one set of people and redistribute it creatively and with good intentions.

I think back to that transformative time, and I still catch my breath. How did it happen so fast? How did the world of my grandparents turn into your world, my grandchildren? How did those momentous decisions ever get made? Surely we must have known the risks. But the potential! The potential for positive change was alluring. And given the global economic conditions...given our dissatisfaction with the political process which seemed unable to move forward or back...maybe it's not surprising that we went off into this spiral instead.

The incubation period was blindingly swift. Though dire consequences were predicted, fabulous utopian consequences were also predicted. What everyone knew was that no one knew what would happen. And I'm sure that the only reason it came to pass is that everyone imagined that they had something to gain, or nothing more to lose.

One thing we knew: polarization along political and religious lines had become destructive and untenable. The transformation, everyone agreed, would shake this up, create new alliances, shift our society into more of an interlaced network instead of divided camps. We didn't know for sure, though, that that interlaced network would be peaceful. There was the possibility, of course, that instead of two sides expressing anger and distrust toward one another, we might end up with anger and distrust of everyone in every direction.

But both sides—we called them the liberals and conservatives back then—both sides saw theoretical and practical reasons to support the change. The consequences of that monumental social experiment are now history...you probably take it for granted. But the original enthusiasms behind the effort may go overlooked by you youngsters who weren't around at the time.

You can't imagine the hopes we had! Perhaps because you don't realize the animosity we needed to overcome. The nation seemed on the brink of catastrophe. Maybe it was the political structure, maybe it was the nature of what we called "media" back then (archaic forms of mass communication that seemed to filter reality into bizarre categories of black and white).

Whatever its cause, we feared that the chasm between the tribes could not be bridged. We had nightmares of class warfare. And here—must I explain again? This notion of "class?" It's no use, probably. You, my grandchildren, won't understand the notion of class any more than your parents could understand the Cold War. I remember when my own Rick and Ben were young (and your Micah, and Eloise). We tried to tell them about the Cold War and the worries our generation had had about nuclear annihilation. We tried to explain *that* era's ideological quarrel between what was called capitalism and communism. And they just went, "Hunh?"

Anyway, why was it so important, to both sides, to people of every class, to embark on this radical social experiment? First I must take you back to 1835. No, you can laugh but I'm not that old, I was not born in 1835. The significance of that date is that it saw the end of state support for the religious establishment in Massachusetts. Up to that time, congregations of the standing order were supported by government (that is: by taxpayers).

"What?" you object. "But the U.S. constitution had done away with any establishment of religion, no?" Well, not yet. Indeed, the federal government *had* been prohibited from aiding or

hindering religion with the 1st amendment back in 1787. But the individual states insisted upon their right to do this for many years.

And the final showdown was an interesting one. It pitted the Universalists, rural outsiders, against the urban Unitarian elite. At the time, ironically, the Unitarians were theological radicals, but they were firmly established as “The Boston Brahmins” of government, society, and commerce. And their parishes received state support, while the Universalists did not.

So in the end, ironically, the law came out against the Unitarian churches...but this result essentially affirmed their theology of religious independence.

It affirmed free will—a notion over which the Unitarians and their Calvinist Puritan forbears had brawled. It sounds crazy now but that’s the issue over which they had parted ways: the Unitarians insisted that human beings had free will to choose between vice and virtue...and the responsibility to choose wisely. The conservative orthodoxy, in contrast, professed that all people were inherently hopelessly corrupt and could be saved only by the grace of their God.

But the spirit of freedom was strong at that time, and over the centuries, it became our American motif. Even conservative christians eventually adopted the principle of free choice, and they adjusted their notion of salvation just slightly—to affirm that *those who would freely choose* Christ would be saved.

Over the next two centuries the liberals and conservatives swung past one another like pendulums, repeatedly. From time to time one emphasizing freedom, choice, intuition, and other romantic ideals...then swinging over to responsibility, duty, and prudent reason.

Well, I’ve digressed from the point I had been making about 1835—when the last state dropped direct financial support for congregations.

Eventually, of course, everyone benefited from this separation of church and state—churches regained the vitality and discipline that comes with financial self-reliance. And the state freed itself of awkward entanglements with organizations that not every citizen wished to support.

And now we jump forward...almost 200 years...to that time between 2015 and 2020 when as those pendulums swung past one another, some strange alliances were formed among the haves and the have nots...among the ideologues and the pragmatists. And thus began a second great revolution: when Americans were given the choice to opt in, or opt out of citizenship.

Much discussion ensued, of course, about what the consequences would be for society (could we even imagine any more that there would be society?) And what about for individuals? Would it be more strategic to opt in or opt out? Not having to pay federal taxes was an alluring vision. Not being eligible to vote—would that really matter anyway? Many thought not. And government services—everyone knew that these would *have to* continue in some form—at least the ones that mattered. So why join up when all you had to do was hang around the edges and you’d probably get all the same benefits as citizens? After all, those softhearted do-gooders who were going to

opt-in—you knew for example that they wouldn't let anybody die from lack of medical care. Would they?

Oh that didn't matter. Because the liberal do-gooders wouldn't be able to operate an effective system of social services and health care anyway—not without the coercion of federal taxes. But all would be well because if any gaps were left by the free market, private charity would fill in those gaps—at least for those who deserved it.

Still, might it be the best bargain to opt in? Think about national security! But then you knew the die hard conservatives would always make sure we had a military. Or if not a national defensive force, then certainly private militias ... and good guys with guns ... to protect any average person from terrorism or foreign invasion.

And what about patriotism? Would it be hypocritical to renounce one's citizenship after having proudly waved a flag one's whole life? Not at all. Nothing could be more faithful to the ideals of freedom than to break the chains of the government masters and shout out "free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty I'm free at last!"

Each of you have your own stories, I'm sure, about this tumultuous period of history. Stories about the way people took care of one another, or failed to take care of one another. Stories about people who were no longer subject to the law...who still chose to respect one another's boundaries.

As you know, about half of American citizens opted in, and about half opted out, roughly equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans and even Libertarians chose citizenship and non-citizenship, each for their own reasons. And we saw some fascinating shifts in ideology and in friendships.

One pundit at the time reflected back upon Alexis De Tocqueville - the French aristocrat who had visited the United States and published his analysis of the American character in his book *Democracy in America* (coincidentally published 1835). De Tocqueville was fascinated by American religion and its odd notions of freedom. He noted how in France religion and freedom were seen as opposites...whereas in America they were seen as mutually supportive.

De Tocqueville marveled at the number and variety of *voluntary associations* in the United States: bible societies, abolition societies, literary societies, public health and hygiene societies, and so many others...all operating within that beautiful realm of free will and goodwill and individual choice. It all tied together, perhaps, since "will" (as in "willing," and "willpower") derived from the Latin "volens—" the same linguistic ancestor as "voluntary," "volunteer," and "benevolence."

De Tocqueville marveled too at the optimism that shone through American ideas about equality. He noted hopefully that America might become the world's first meritocracy, where everyone would have a chance to succeed, according to their own efforts and skills.

So this was the American spirit that finally raised the question: How could anyone be compelled into citizenship? How dare the majority impose this upon the free individual?

If Church could no more dictate our thoughts or behaviors in our quest for life, liberty and happiness, then neither would the State!

But this was not anarchy! We would respect those who would freely choose to be bound together in whatever institutional forms they might arrange. Families, corporations, cooperatives, knitting circles, bird watchers...whatever forms of association that people chose for themselves would be fine. And it was inevitable that some would choose to build something akin to the old government. And that was ok, as long as no one was forced to join it.

It was a risky venture, but the wrinkles would work themselves out. They would have to. Too much was at stake to permit national identity to interfere with freedom's final frontier.

Voluntary citizenship and voluntary non-citizenship—each would have their pros and cons. No one disputed that. Rather, it was the existence of pros and cons that made the choice so vital. No one would need to say if something was a pro or a con—it wouldn't matter what EVERYONE thought, it would only matter what YOU thought. If collectivism was a good thing for you, then choose that. If going it alone was good for you, then blessings be upon your journey.

Until that moment, the centuries of compulsory citizenship had led to our taking it for granted. But once the veil was removed, those who did choose citizenship gained heightened consciousness, heightened gratitude, and a greater willingness to give oneself to community and country SINCE THAT WAS WHAT THEY CHOSE.

Again, those of you who lived through that period have some amazing tales to tell. I hope you'll share them (without condescension) with your younger neighbors.

Stories about the transformation's impact upon

- currency and commerce
- industry, scientific research and development
- food safety, pollution, and international relations
- urban planning, infrastructure, and schools
- the different forms of propaganda used to persuade people to choose citizenship or non-citizenship
- or the fascinating new quandaries around immigration and borders.

Everyone likes to tell where they were at the turning point: the big government shut down. Congress had flirted with this possibility so many times that no one really took it seriously. Things had always turned out ok, of course, until that one time: it didn't. At the tipping point, with everyone out of balance, new self-perpetuating cycles of reaction and counter-reaction swirled through our desiccated prairies of frustration to set off an entirely unsuspected epidemic of—get this: cooperation! Yes, with radical synergistic thinking applied to that most traditional of pieties—that governments derive their just power *from the consent of the governed!*—it was like a gigantic collective AHA moment.

Don't misunderstand: we were not all becoming moderates. We were not compromising. Compromise was out of the question. Remember: Americans considered themselves rebels, dissenters, nonconformists, revolutionaries. Tough, independent, resolute.

The great American story was that of David versus Goliath. Whether we were in power or out of power, in our rhetoric we were always the righteous underdog, the heroic little guy with heart against the mechanical ogres of big government or big unions or big business.

Or big media. Some of you may remember a profession we had at that time called "journalism." It's hard now to explain what it was, but journalists attempted to convey some truth that they observed to people who hadn't been present at a significant moment in history. One of my favorite journalists was named Bill Moyers. His reporting sometimes uncovered abuses of power. So many powerful people felt threatened by his work, attacked his reputation, and tried to destroy the organizations for which he worked.

Mr. Moyers was once asked whether he considered himself courageous. He responded: no, his work did not require courage; it required independence. Without independence he would never have been able to speak his truth and stay on the air.

He had independence, he said, because of the people behind the scenes who ensured that his organization survived against constant attack and threat. The people who defended his independence, even when they didn't agree with him, those were people of courage, he said.

Oh I've digressed again. I am sorry. I am an old man now and have trouble keeping my thoughts on track.

Some decades have passed since the events of 2016, and now I approach my own century mark. Other nations have attempted the voluntary citizenship route. Nations themselves continue to merge and divide—geographically and virtually. And so my children's children: wondrous cascades of change are still before you.

Today, as always, you face difficult choices over limited resources. Once again you are uncertain whether human nature includes the right combination of prudence and risk, individual courage and collective conscience...whether we have within us what it will take to see us through the crisis at hand. Once again the meaning of community, and the choices around passivity and activism confront you.

Those of my own generation will remember old President Clinton's wife, Hillary. She once got in trouble for asserting that "it takes a village to raise a child." (You might have seen her in the footnotes of your history books; she made a couple of valiant comebacks to no avail.) That idea of hers, though, remains powerful. It *still* takes a village to raise a child. And you, my dears, you still have to decide where you stand, and what part you're going to play within the villages that still remain.