

~ *Democracy* ~

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

July 3, 2016

Rev. Paul Beckel

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association

covenant to affirm and promote:

- ☞ The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- ☞ Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- ☞ Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- ☞ A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- ☞ The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- ☞ The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- ☞ Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

...Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision...

[UUA bylaws adopted at the 1984 & 1985 General Assemblies.
For full text see the page before hymn #1 in the grey hymnal]

WELCOME

On this Independence Day weekend I invite you to reflect upon conscience and democracy. Let's begin by lighting the chalice as we say our covenant...

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Imagine a stalwart people—seeking autonomy—deliberately removing themselves from the chaos and constraints of Europe. Are you thinking of the Pilgrims who crossed the waters four hundred years ago to establish the American colonies? Or are you thinking about Brexit?

What comes of a quest for freedom? It took over 150 years from the time that the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts Bay until the collective drive for religious and political freedom would mature into a novel form of government.

Along the way a drive toward religious freedom would lead many colonial congregations to reject their traditional Calvinist doctrines...and to form a new religious movement called Unitarianism.

Then after another couple of centuries, England and her old colonies would become best friends. The Unitarians would evolve: from heretics into the Elite, and then back to heretics again as they joined the Universalist rabble in a covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience and use of the democratic process - in their congregations and in society at large.

Today, to get us started on our exploration of where we've been and where we may be going, let's sing about who we are, or at least, who we aspire to be, as we continue in our quest to secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.

GATHERING SONG *We're Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table* #407

ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS

MUSICAL MEDITATION

PROVOCATIONS

A cynic [Florence King] once said: "democracy is the fig leaf of elitism."

A fig leaf. As in democracy is just a pretty and pacifying screen which hides the truth that just a few people hold most of the power in our society.

This is a quote from decades ago, so I find it interesting that today we have two strong political movements, led by Trump and Sanders, and generally thought of as opposites, who might say this same thing: "democracy (at least as far as how it's been practiced so far) is the fig leaf of elitism...but now we're going to use democracy to overcome elitism."

A realist [Celia Green] once said: "in an autocracy, one person has his way; in an aristocracy, a few people have their way; in a democracy, no one has his way."

A great deal of the theory of democratic society arose in Great Britain; these theories eventually led the American colonies to declare their independence from Britain. Now a majority of British voters have declared their independence from the European Union.

There is a reasonable chance, it seems to me, that no one will get their way in this deal.

What is democracy? What does it have to do with freedom, and conscience, and Unitarian Universalism?

Is it a big deal that in our principles we affirm and promote "The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large?" Or is that just another fig leaf?

SILENCE (3:00)

REFLECTIONS

100 years ago there were no democracies – not as we think of them now – civil governments in which all adult citizens are allowed to vote. Today there are 123 democracies – nearly two thirds of the nations on Earth at least giving lip service to democracy’s ideals.

And if, beyond the realm of politics, we think of “democracy” as simply the dispersion of power from the few to the many, again, democracy has prevailed - not only in government, but in religious pluralism, in the Facebookification of media, and in access to guns and bombs.

Dispersion of power from the few to the many. Power to build and power to destroy.

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Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote the right of conscience and use of the democratic process in our congregations and in society at large. What does this mean? Is it enough to affirm and promote the dispersion of power from the few to the many?

I’d like to take a few minutes to explore what we call “the democratic process.” And then I’ll come back to another important word in that principle which we might overlook: “conscience.” I don’t think “conscience” is just thrown in there at random.

When Americans think of democracy, and when UUs use the term “democratic process” we’re packing together two distinct elements: elections, *and* civil liberties. Powers granted to majorities and power to *protect* each of us from majorities.

Freely elected governments can be corrupt, inefficient, shortsighted, and unresponsive to those who elect them. So in addition to elections we need a constitution guaranteeing basic human rights, limits on governmental power, fair legal process conducted by effective institutions, and consistent application of the law to everyone.

So we do not, today, have a pure democracy, and we probably don’t want one. With referenda on everything, government by opinion polls, perpetual recalls. Every act of every elected official needing approval by their constituents. This would be not only be unbearably inefficient and unstable, but the majority would inevitably trample on the basic human rights of various minorities—of which we are all a part.

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So good government – in civil society or in our congregations – is a balancing act – keeping in tension 1) the collective power of the people and 2) the individual power of the person. To call this a balancing act is to describe both the skill one needs to shift constantly to maintain the proper tension – and also the sense of humor and sense of frailty we must maintain to take this job seriously while keeping a light touch.

That's where conscience comes in. And that's where it gets religious. And that's where people get nervous. Because we like to imagine that religious values can be kept out of government. But, in my opinion, that's not possible. If we're going to be balancing the good of the individual with the good of society, then we're talking about making judgments about what-is-good. And that's going to involve judgments informed by our religious values.

What is conscience? And how can it slip in there without upsetting the balance?

Conscience is an inner voice. But it's not only inside us. It is the place where we are connected – every one of us to every other one. We have no conscience unless we are aware of our connections to one another. We're not going to stop to wonder how our actions and our choices are going to affect others—unless we are aware that others are going to be affected by our actions and our choices.

My conscience reminds me to treat myself with dignity; my conscience affirms my sovereignty over my own life. But at the same time my conscience reminds me to treat you with dignity, and it affirms your sovereignty over your life. Conscience is the recognition of equality, as well as connection.

Conscience is the consciousness that when I act in a way which will diminish your dignity, then I am simultaneously diminishing my own, because I am connected to you. I am a part of you. My conscience knows: I am old, I am young, I am straight, I am gay, I am an immigrant, a terrorist, a superstar, and a nerd.

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And yet, my conscience can make mistakes. Sometimes, using my best judgment, I will trample all over you. Therefore there must be limits to the sovereignty of individual conscience. Healthy democracy is the incarnation of the collective conscience.

And the democratic process, that is: the combination of free and fair elections, along with constitutional liberties and processes, this process balances our powerful fallible individual conscience with our powerful fallible collective conscience.

But that's all pretty abstract. What this means in practice is that we have to practice the democratic process. We cannot simply blame those in power for what we perceive as an imbalance. We can't fault those with whom we disagree for having conviction and energy, creativity, and the commitment to invest their resources into changing government as their conscience directs them. We have to add our own inner voice into the mix.

As Barbara Jordan said [1977] “The stakes are too high for government to be a spectator sport.” The stakes are also too high for congregational life to be a spectator sport. It’s tricky in congregations though. We expect a certain amount of rancor in public life...we expect quite a bit of disagreement. But church is voluntary. We join the church we want to join. It might seem less likely that we will have serious differences among a self-selected group of people. Plus we probably bring some unconscious expectation to a religious setting —an expectation of peace and harmony.

In civil government, a slim majority or even a plurality can take power and run with it. In a congregation, we need a significant majority to carry any significant decision – or it can seriously undermine morale. We expect to fight in public government, but ongoing wrangling in a voluntary association is poison.

And knowing this, many times in church people don’t speak up. Our inner voice remains within. We try to avoid differences. But it’s impossible to promote creative interchange if we expect others to remain silent, or if we ourselves remain silent.

Practicing the democratic process in a congregation is difficult. Because if we are going to speak of the congregational good, then we have to make judgments about who is in... and out, what we are... and aren’t, how to spend our collective time, energy, and money, and what goals to set our sights on. This is much harder than just voting “yes” or “no.”

We’ve been fortunate for many years to have congregational leaders who have guided our democratic process. We’ve had teachers teaching each new generation to express themselves with passion, *and* to reflect thoughtfully on the limits of their passions.

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The trick to maintaining a democratic process is to combine both skepticism and commitment. This is true both in civil government and in congregational government.

Talking about religion and politics, especially at the same time, is messy, and often uncomfortable. It reveals contradictions in our own thinking, it reveals ambiguity, it reveals differences – even between allies. But when we speak about our values, whether in terms of the public good or the congregational good, we often find common ground.

Because wherever we find ourselves on the political spectrum, we can engage with one another from the core understandings that have evolved through our liberal religious history:

in the 18th century, the conviction that all are equal in the eyes of god;

in the 19th century, the insight that intermediaries are not necessary for us to understand what is good and true – the priest, the Quran, the Tibetan prayer flags, the visit from an angel — these may all be helpful, but any truth used to govern all people must be accessible to all people;

then in the 20th century, an affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of all people;

and in the 21st century, the growing realization that we are all part of one interdependent web of being.

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To be connected is a form of bondage. “Religion” refers to tying together. To subject ourselves to bondage, voluntarily, may seem odd, but our existence within an interdependent web is a reality. So to fight it, to pull away from our interdependent being, is both violent and wasteful.

Conscience is the locus of decision-making, based upon the fullness of our personal experience. And yet it is not self-centered, even if it is at the center of our selves.

So the democratic process is the exercise of conscience. Not particularly efficient or practical. In regard to practicality, democracy is of course the worst possible form of government, except for all the others. But we affirm it, despite its drawbacks, because it embodies human dignity. It empowers the weak to grasp power, and allows the strong to let it go.

While dignity and conscience are pretty abstract, the democratic process is something concrete that we can bring into our lives, a practical tool which will endure if tended with care...sustained not by our right to engage, but by our actual engagement.

CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE

Question: How have you exercised your “right of conscience” in a way that connects-you-to, rather than differentiates-you-from, your community?

SHARING OUR GIFTS

Until the Protestant Reformation, there had never been an offering collected during church services. (Nor pledging, of course.) Salaries, buildings, communion wine — everything was paid for by the local prince or king, the papacy, or the sale of “indulgences.” Even in early America, churches were paid for by taxes — never by freewill giving. By the same token, it was the prince, king, or Pope — or the government — who decided how the people would worship. Thus today, our freedom to worship as we choose is directly related to our sharing in the expense of it.

SENDING SONG *Come and Go with Me to that Land* #1018

BENEDICTION

Take the spirit of this flaming chalice with you wherever you go. The flame, which represents creativity and freedom. The chalice, which represents the limits of freedom – a firm foundation upon which the flame can dance: reason, law, and the democratic process. Bring them both into the world with you, dance with one and rest on the other, until we meet again.