

Faithful Democracy  
Eastrose Fellowship UU  
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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 most recent former 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 the 2020 election- its run-up and its corrupted aftermath, especially the horrifying assault on the Capitol and the details of how a US President instigated an insurrection.

Voter suppression exists to this day. It may not look like the iteration of the 1950s, but it is there, nonetheless – gerrymandering, closing polling places in traditionally black neighborhoods, casting doubt on the integrity of poll workers and voting machines. And need I even point out that our democracy is more fragile and vulnerable than ever?

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 straight, white, blue-eyed prosperity Jesus who never existed.

Despite this perversion of “the gospel,” at its true heart (Jesus would never have preached like these pastors), religion is essentially 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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, for instance, we are affirming that principle in real time. It is embedded in our ethos, and it is an expression of our faith.

In his *Berry Street* address at our General Assembly in 1942, 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. 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, but it is also an imperfect process.” Still true. Thus, as UUs, our faith calls us to oppose the forces that seek to thwart democracy. We must be decent and engage our first principle, too – human dignity and freedom go hand in hand.

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, righteous, and labelling; more about listening for understanding than agreement. This is a mountain to climb.

Again, to those who argue that we need to stay out of politics because we are a religious organization, I ask: if we do, will Christian nationalists? Will evangelicals who want to remove all reproductive freedoms from women? Will Neo-Nazis who want to expunge Jews from our society, or “America First” skinheads who want to ship everyone but white Americans out of our country?

To be clear, I am not only against the 10 commandments being posted in classrooms, but also our 7 UU principles. Freedom of religion means freedom from religion, if desired. That is what Jefferson insisted on. He never suggested we be a “Christian” nation. He even mentions “Jews, Hindoos and Mohamadans” in his doctrine of religious toleration.

I realize I have a choice, as do you...but if I choose to stay on the sidelines, hide and remain silent and safe, I will need to ask where I lost the commitment of my calling along the way and became wholly self- absorbed.

In the book and series, The Handmaid's Tale, I see myself in the populations targeted by Gilead: a Jew, a loud-mouthed woman, and a member of the liberal clergy. I would most definitely be “on the wall.” It’s chilling and real with the dawn of the latest Fascistic blueprints like Project 2025.

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, Eric 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 2024? 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 imagine so.

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 Universalist 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.

Even so, Hughes refrain shocks us out of the mythic view of America we cling to. A place welcoming the tired and poor, a land of opportunity for all, a solid sentry for democracy. Are we still holding to that view in 2024 with the threat to our democracy so real and out in the open?

These threats are not new, just more overt and brazen and well-funded by conservatives, evangelicals, and openly Nationalistic fascist groups. And easier to disseminate through social media. Let's not forget the echo of the Moral Majority, Focus on the Family, and political voices like Rick Santorum and Mike Huckabee.

If you want a chilling example of how not new this all is, listen to Rachel Maddow's podcast "Ultra" or read her book on the same subject, "Prequel: An American Fight Against Fascism." In it, she offers a chilling account of how, in the 1930s and 1940s,

fascists plotted to overthrow Congress from within and the influence of a burgeoning Neo-Nazi movement in America led by such popular radio mouthpieces as the virulently antisemitic Father Coughlin.

Some say we are due for a fascist interlude in America. Our democracy is young, its fragile and nearly every democratic society in history has at one point been fractured and corrupted by fascism. The latest iterations are bold faced and explicit, especially the blueprint called Project 2025.

Spearheaded by the ultra-conservative Heritage Foundation, it is a dystopian nightmare that they wish to implement in the first 180 days of a potential second Trump Presidency, all by executive order and without the consent from Congress. And this “project” is not a couple of policy wonks or finance bros in a DC office building. It’s a brigade of more than 100 right-wing groups and a huge web of wealthy dark money funders. Say a prayer. Please learn about this threat – here is a summary <https://joebiden.com/project2025/>

Just a couple weeks ago, delegates at our General Assembly approved a set of shared UU values. We are a values-based non-creedal religion. The preamble states: “We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of love.” There were quibbles over the word “accountable.” That it is somehow coercive. I disagree strenuously with that interpretation.

If we are not moved to be accountable to each other and to our imperiled democracy, then I’d need to ask myself and ask you: why am I here? Why are you here? If it is only to inspire myself for myself, then we are a social club. The very essence of humanism is the idea that we take what inspires us out into the world to co-create a more beloved community, a beachhead for goodness to repel evil and injustice.

The Rabbi Hillel famously posed this question, way back in the first century CE - *“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”* This quote emphasizes the importance of individual responsibility, selflessness, and seizing opportunities for positive action.

There are both quiet and loud ways to engage in positive actions which mobilize our shared values as UUs. To keep it in-house, you can join our Eastrose “Good Trouble Gang” or investigate the UU the Vote initiative online. Other organizations include Vote Forward, Swing Left, specific action groups like GLAAD, Planned Parenthood, the ACLU, the NAACP, and the Anti-Defamation League. Nearby there is East County Rising and statewide initiatives such as Oregon UU Voices for Justice.

You might investigate the organization called Faithful Democracy, a multi-faith community of organizations and congregations who share the moral imperative of repairing and sustaining 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.

Walt Whitman tells us: "I hear America singing. The varied carols I hear. Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs." May our collective American voices rise up in a robust oratorio of freedom, rather than in a sorrowful requiem for a dead democracy.

Daylight is burning. May we be brave.

Blessed be, blessed we. Bless our country. And Amen.

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