

## **UUCY, Sunday, January 24, 2021**

### **Our Democratic Principle**

By Mike Gempler

Good morning, my name is Mike Gempler and I am a member of this congregation. Thank you for allowing me to speak today.

I would like to begin by reading the 5<sup>th</sup> Principle from our UUA Statement of Principles and Sources:

The 5th Principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association : The Right of Conscience and the Use of the Democratic Process Within Our Congregations and in Society at Large.

“In our religious lives, the democratic process requires trust in the development of each individual conscience—a belief that such development is possible for each of us, as well as a commitment to cultivate our own conscience. We could call it a commitment to the value of each person. In the words of [Theodore Parker](#), ‘Democracy means not “I am as good as you are,” but “You are as good as I am.”’ My connection with the sacred is only as precious as my willingness to acknowledge the same connection in others.”

I’m not an expert on democracy. I’m not a political philosopher, or a Constitutional lawyer. But I was asked by the UUCY Sunday Services Committee to talk about democracy, and specifically with a nod to the Unitarian Universalist 5<sup>th</sup> Principle: The Right of Conscience and the Use of the Democratic Process Within Our Congregations and in Society at Large. Certainly, the thought to ask someone to speak about our democratic principle was likely spurred by the timeliness of the topic, with the United States experiencing an enormous and vicious electoral battle and the inauguration of a new President and Vice President. It is also likely that I have been asked to address this subject because much of my job involves work in government relations, and I spend a significant amount of my work

time working with state agencies and the legislature as a registered lobbyist for the Washington Growers League in Olympia, and to a smaller degree in Washington, D.C. with federal agencies, the administration, and Congress. This work allows for a close up view of our democratic process in our state and federal government.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have a guiding principle that supports the use of democratic process in our churches and our society at large. As UU's, we may ask ourselves whether our government elections and operations meet the standard of our 5<sup>th</sup> Principle. We may ask ourselves how democracy is faring in the world, and whether the trends in society are moving towards, or away from democracy.

I realize that democracy is not a given in our world. I recognize that now; but as a child, my little mind chock full of the American mythology funneled into my eager ears and eyes during my indoctrination, I mean, education in American history class, I regarded the exalted ideals of American democracy as the normal state of the world. I was so wonderfully naïve and innocent within my American myth bubble, it was hard to conceive that democracy didn't exist everywhere, except of course in those countries cursed by the tyrannical rule of communist dictators that I had heard about in the news and government propaganda, and that were presented almost as cartoonish evil empires. A substantial part of American society has held the belief that American Democratic Values were pure and ideal, and that every other country should look to us for inspiration to change their own inferior systems. The 2020 presidential election may have finally killed that myth. Americans may finally have woken up to the fact that our American democracy is not perfect, is not always fully intact, and is constantly under attack from an array of forces, mostly domestic. We must constantly work to protect and nurture our democratic processes and institutions in the US.

One of the most comforting features of our Yakima church is that we have hosted the League of Women Voters as a tenant for many years. It comforts me to know that the League is there, consistently working to support our democratic processes. My Mom Kay was an active League of

Women Voters member for over 50 years. My family moved from Central New York State to Northwestern Ohio in 1971. I was a high school freshman, and I recall an episode in which Mom, who after attending 12 different schools before graduating from high school, made a habit of joining and becoming active in her favored organizations on the day she arrived in a new community. She became good at being new in the community by learning to just jump in. By 1972 she was an officer in the Findlay, Ohio League of Women Voters, and she had triggered some of the local good old boys by some comment that went public. The newspaper article reported that the President of the local John Birch Society was now referring to her as the President of the League of Women Vipers. I was so proud of my Mom for standing up for the League's democratic values. I didn't know much at that age, but I did know that the League promoted and defended honest voting, and that they encouraged everyone of age to express themselves by voting, by participating in the democratic process.

The relationship of the Unitarian Universalist movement with the League of Women Voters is longstanding. There must be lots of common membership. At this point I think it is taken for granted, but the relationship between these two organizations demonstrates the foundational commitment that they both have to democratic principles. I mean do UU churches actually exist that DON'T have a League of Women Voters office? The two groups share a commitment to democratic values. It is apparent that both of our groups know that democracy must be actively protected; that it must be cherished and secured. Other groups that serve as sentinels for the American democratic system share that pro-democracy work, and thank goodness they are there! And after the resolution of the 2020 Presidential election just last week, I see evidence in the news media and social media that more Americans are critically aware that our democracy came close to failing, and that we must work to re-establish the strength of weakened institutions of democracy, and rebuild our country's confidence in the democratic institutions, laws, and values. There are forces actively trying to undermine our democracy, and we must stay vigilant and fight every effort by fascists and power hungry opportunists.

The anti-democratic forces that we are fighting aren't all nefarious right wing extremist groups controlled and funded by people like Steve Bannon, who is essentially an international political terrorist. Other anti-democratic forces exist as permanent features of our system. Wealthy and powerful individuals and businesses have always posed a threat to the power and standing of the individual in democratic systems. Ignorance and apathy on the part of the rank and file allow aggressive groups and individuals to dominate the process in elected bodies and wield undue influence over legislation and regulation. This latter phenomenon is a large and growing threat. Large blocks of our citizenry are ignorant about how our democracy works, and they are highly susceptible to influence by misinformation and emotional philosophical pleas from anti-democratic organizations and opportunistic media personalities trying to make a buck by jumping on the train of anger and contempt for existing institutions.

It is obvious that over 30 years of right wing propaganda 24/7/365 on radio and television has wrought a deep destruction of knowledge and trust in our democracy among our American population. Since the FCC eliminated the Fairness Doctrine for broadcasters using public airwaves in 1987, the propaganda has multiplied exponentially. Opposition to the Fairness Doctrine on free speech grounds is understandable, but the reality is that without it, right wing propaganda has been allowed to spread and grow without sufficient counterpoint, to the point where millions of Americans can and do isolate themselves within a right wing bubble world. This has occurred to such an extent that even mainstream media, politicians and government agency staff repeat right wing talking points without knowing the origin or implications of the message. Our democracy has suffered because of un-counteracted right wing media. And now we hear of ministers in conservative churches repeating right wing political points to their congregations during the recent election. As Unitarian Universalists we need to support the development of pro-democracy messaging and even to consider reinstating the fairness doctrine. With so much media existing on cable and online, the Fairness Doctrine may not be as effective as needed, and so we must consider additional means of counteracting the constant anti-democratic propaganda.

Government itself can be anti-democratic by stifling messages and activities that are in opposition to the latest edicts and initiatives of an administration. The tendency of government to bend or eliminate rules in order to favor its position is another phenomenon that requires citizen vigilance and involvement. As an example of anti-democratic government activity, the US Government suppressed true information about the Vietnam War, engaged in escalation of the war without telling the citizens, and prevented a free open informed debate about military activity in Southeast Asia from happening. The Unitarian Universalist Association got involved when it published the Pentagon Papers through its own Beacon Press in 1971. This demonstrates that we UU's have a role to play in defending our democratic principles. People who support democracy must be willing to speak out and act to defend it. Democratic process in our congregations and in our society is part of who we are as Unitarian Universalists. It is in our Principles. Our religious movement has taken a position and declared ourselves involved as pro-democracy activists.

In my own experience, I see the tendency for other players in our political system to try and ignore or bend democratic principles in order to gain power and position. And all of us who do that are usually sorry for the destruction and dysfunction brought upon our democratic system by our blind greed and opportunism, but it seems so right at the time to take an advantage even if it is at the expense of democratic ideals and the rules and traditions that they inspire. After all, the democratic principles are abstract talking points compared to the very immediate demands of the ongoing political battles. Just Win Baby!! Those of you who follow American football will recognize this as the mantra of the former owner of the Oakland Raiders; but this sentiment, driven by competition, aggression and the immediacy of NOW has always been part of politics and an enemy to democracy. We just endured an immoral and corrupt federal administration that subverted democratic principles by attempting to win at any cost, by repressing democracy itself through its rejection of democratic principles like transparency, open access to facts, and reasonable oversight of operations.

Political parties are a constant potential threat to democratic process. Rules and traditions established by political parties can be anti-democratic and serve those in power who create them. Once in power, political parties can establish rules that slow down the process, restrict involvement to a small group of people, restrict debate, and restrict movement of bills that have widespread support. It's an insidious problem, because it is so difficult to control. But the effect is to limit the power of the individual citizen's vote.

A lot of people consider lobbying to be unethical, but at its best it is a process where citizens and the groups they form hire professionals to carry their message, to inform and educate elected officials. Citizen lobbyists generally don't have the time or finances to be in attendance every day of a legislative session, track legislation and develop information for their cause. Professional lobbyists play a valuable role in helping citizens, organizations and businesses communicate with elected officials. But the level of access that lobbyists develop over time is extremely concerning. Lobbyists commonly write first drafts of bills and find elected officials to sponsor them. The influence they have over policy is immense. What has developed is a system in which a legislator, who is understandably not an expert on every issue impacting their constituents, relies on lobbyists to provide expertise and proposed solutions. The only saving grace is that legislators also rely on lobbyists representing opposing views to counter with their own expertise and resources. Then the legislator weighs the information, consults with constituents, and makes a decision. In our representative democracy there is no guarantee that those decisions will reflect the desires of a majority of constituents. Frequently, the news media doesn't understand the issue, the average citizens are uninformed or don't care or don't have time to care, and a decision is made to spend public resources or grant favor to a small part of the constituency and few really understand the details. This is where the money plays its role. Support does gain access, and so does the level of economic activity the lobbyist represents. There is no doubt in my mind that most citizens, given the opportunity to observe this lobbying process first hand, would consider it far too "clubby" to meet the standards of an open democracy. The access to power of lobbyists far exceeds the access that citizens enjoy. It is a natural



phenomenon I guess, but it is also a constant threat to open democratic process and requires constant monitoring by citizen groups and open government advocates. It also requires action from time to time by institutions such as the Public Disclosure Commission to put the power dynamic back into balance.

We have just lived through four years of campaigning for the recent 2020 Presidential election, as well as many tortuous months of process to resolve the election according to our US constitutional electoral laws, rules and customs. During the last four years we have observed constant examples of people who want something, subverting democracy for personal gain. They don't care about democracy, they just want their stuff or their thing or their break or their philosophical point accepted and put into play. People on all sides of the political spectrum come from all over to the centers of government to get something. Some of them are noble and some of them are helping poor and underrepresented people find justice. Some of them are looking for ways to keep their business or industry viable and some of them are just looking to dip into the public treasury to benefit themselves. Some of them are trying hard to solve difficult problems. But none of them have the right to ignore or subvert the democratic principles intended to make our country's political processes fair and just.

What I'm saying is that democracy isn't just about people getting involved and having the right to express their own conscience through a vote. The value of each person who has and exercises their right to vote, whether in church or in government elections, can be diluted or even destroyed by secrecy, money, restrictions to access and concentration of power. Our UU principles focus on the worth of every individual and the right of every individual to vote their conscience and have a voice. Although our 5<sup>th</sup> principle mentions democracy in society at large, it doesn't allude to the constant work and vigilance necessary to keep our democracy healthy, or to just keep it at all. We must ask ourselves; do we really believe in democratic principles, in the rule of law, in open and transparent political and government process, in a full accounting of all money in and out? It's not just about going to vote. While voting and citizen involvement is the

foundation of our democracy, we must dedicate ourselves to the constant fight to bring and keep justice and fairness in our political system. This sometimes means not taking advantage when a democratic principle is violated, even if we can get away with it. It means dedicating ourselves to the preservation of justice, fairness and transparency in our political systems. That is how I suggest we fully express our Unitarian Universalist democratic principle. That is how we protect the use of right of conscious and the power of the individual. That is how we protect democracy.