

***Whose Democracy?***  
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One of the things I try to consider with every service I prepare is what our tradition has to say about our given theme. In this case, democracy is foundational to our religious tradition and has been since the very beginning. It only makes sense when we stop to consider the fact that Unitarianism and Universalism were both forming on these shores at the same time as the republic was coming into being. Both religious traditions were influenced by the same enlightenment ideals that influenced the unfolding of the revolution and the establishment of the democracy.<sup>i</sup> In fact, several of the people who were influential in that process were also involved in Unitarianism or Universalism including the revolutionary war patriots Paul Revere (a Unitarian) and Ethan Allen (a Universalist), Benjamin Rush, a Universalist physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence and John Adams, a Unitarian and second president of the United States.

In our current covenant as an association of congregations, we pledge to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and society at large. We can trace this principle back to the beginnings of both traditions. In 1790 when the Universalists first gathered to draw up articles of faith and decide on a form of church governance, they selected a polity which was closely modeled after the Congregationalists who recognized the authority of each congregation. However, by the time the New England Convention of Universalists formally met again 13 years later, they concluded that their original articles of faith and plan of church government didn't allow enough room for the growing diversity represented in their congregations. So, they drew up a second, streamlined statement of faith to which they added a liberty clause forbidding any congregation or convention from requiring a creedal test of those who would be members. They also revised their governance to allow more latitude at the local level while at the same time strengthening the power of the convention in regard to the ordination, fellowship and discipline of ministers.

Whereas the Universalists reserved some powers at the level of the convention, the Unitarians were purely congregational in their polity from the very beginning. While the Universalists considered themselves to be a denomination, the Unitarians first organized as an association of congregations. The original bylaws of the American Unitarian Association declared that "its constituency is congregational in polity and that individual freedom of belief is inherent in the Unitarian tradition."<sup>ii</sup> When the Unitarians and the Universalists merged in 1961, they adopted the Unitarian practice of strictly congregational polity and affirmed in the original principles of the new association the commitment to the democratic method. Writing about this commitment as a religious ideal, the Unitarian Universalist minister Earl Holt explains that, for us, "democracy . . . is more than a mechanism of governance. It is an expression of faith in the power of human beings to shape their own lives."<sup>iii</sup>

In our congregations today, we see that commitment to democracy practiced at every level of leadership. The way we make decisions is by voting. The members of the congregation have the privilege of voting to select the members of the Board of Trustees and other elected leaders. The

elected leaders make day to day decisions on behalf of the congregation by voting. The congregation reserves the right to make significant decisions including major financial and policy decisions for itself. If leaders want to say our church is for or against a particular social issue, they can only do so if the congregation votes to authorize that statement. This is true not only for the lay leaders, but also for the minister, who by the way, is also selected by vote of the congregation. Our polity is congregational, which means that our congregations govern themselves.

This polity does not stop at our congregations but is also reflected in the governance of our association of congregations. The duly voted upon representatives from each congregation form a General Assembly every year. The General Assembly retains the authority to govern the business of the association. The General Assembly elects its leaders including not only the Board of Trustees but also the Moderator and the President of the association, our highest levels of office. If the leaders of the association want to say the Unitarian Universalist Association is for or against a particular social issue, they can only do so if either the collective history of the tradition or the General Assembly has taken a position with regard to that issue. At every level, Unitarian Universalists vote to conduct our business. This is the primary way we enact the democratic process.

We believe that all people should have a vote regarding important matters that concern them. And yet, we can't stop there, for there is more to the democratic process than exercising our freedom of conscience by casting a vote. Voting is necessary, but it isn't sufficient. Unfortunately we too often stop there and that leads us, writes the author Francis Moore Lappe, to an experience of "thin democracy." She describes thin democracy as a system of elected government plus a free market economy "ruled by supply and demand 'laws' divorced from ethical values." In such a system, wealth and power will inevitably concentrate in the hands of a few and marginalize the voices of the many.<sup>iv</sup> We can see this being acted out in the halls of congress where the ratio of lobbyists to elected officials is over 20 to 1.<sup>v</sup> In light of the corporate influence exercised in elections and governance, many of us fear that our democracy has been dangerously exploited and corrupted.

And still, in the words of the poet, "not everything is lost." Our democracy was formed for us. We are the people. Our challenge is to claim it and to claim our own power. In contrast to thin democracy, Lappe describes what she calls "living democracy." A living democracy, she writes, "is a society that believes in its citizens and their values, and thus assumes that the best outcomes flow from engaging them in all dimensions of public affairs. Citizens shield the electoral process from the influence of wealth and use the marketplace as a tool subordinate to their core ethical values. . . . In thin democracy, power is something invested in official position, wealth, or armed might. Living democracy claims power's root Latin meaning: posse, to be able. Power is our capacity to act, what we create together."<sup>vi</sup> In her book, *Democracy's Edge*, Lappe describes what she calls the arts of democracy; skills we all need to learn and practice in order to move more fully into our future as citizens in a living democracy.

The Quaker author Parker Palmer takes a different approach in his book *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. Rather than emphasizing skills, which he affirms are important, he describes five habits of the heart he believes we need to cultivate in order to "create a politics worthy of the

human spirit.” His philosophy draws from the writings of 19<sup>th</sup> century French chronicler of *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville who also used that phrase habits of the heart to describe the mores he believed we would need to cultivate in order to sustain our democracy. Palmer uses that phrase in the manner of Tocqueville to describe “the integrative core of all the human faculties.”<sup>vii</sup> Parker is especially concerned with identifying the habits of the heart that will protect and promote the wholeness of each person.

One of the habits that strike me with particular resonance in this political season is “the ability to live with tension in life giving ways.” Parker reminds us that tension is a sign of life, for the end of tension is death.<sup>viii</sup> And yet, so many of us, myself included, struggle to find a sense of peace amidst the tension that is constantly evident in the public sphere. Some of the issues that matter to me most including marriage equality, reproductive justice, environmental justice, a moral budget that protects the vulnerable and immigrant justice, just to name a few, are regularly the focal point of polarized debates. With regard to each or these matters, the political parties have policy positions, some of which reflect the current law of the land and some of which reflect a commitment to pursue reform. Our system is designed to allow for endless reformation. In this way, Parker says, tension is built into our political system with its balance of powers, enabling us to keep returning to our most vexing questions with the freedom to revise and refine our answers.<sup>ix</sup> In any given moment, the answers authorized by the state might be contrary to the dictates of our own conscience.

Thus, the challenge of participation in a democratic society, is to stay in the conversation, to remain a part of the political process and to use our powers to help bend the moral arc of the universe closer to our vision of justice all the while remembering that the way we see justice may be very different than our neighbor’s vision of justice. This is difficult work which is why Parker describes it as living in the “tragic gap.” On one side of the gap is reality and on the other side lies possibility. For example, on one side of the gap we see the realities of war, on the other side we see the possibilities of peace. If we get overwhelmed by the pain of reality, we can become mired in cynicism. If we lose ourselves in the dreams of possibility, we can become lost in idealism. In the center, in the tragic gap, we learn to live with the tension.

Palmer calls it a tragic gap because the truth is that it will never be closed. “No one who has stood for high values – love, truth, justice – has died being able to declare victory once and for all,” he writes. “If we embrace values like those, we need to find ways to stand in the gap for the long haul.”<sup>x</sup> And to do that, he continues, we need to recalculate what it means to have success. If we measure success by effectiveness, we will surely lose the courage to continue the multi-generational quest for greater justice. Thus, he suggests, we should measure our efforts by faithfulness, by our capacity to be “true to [our] own gifts, true to [our] perception of the world’s needs, and true to those points where [our] gifts and those needs intersect.”<sup>xi</sup>

Palmer writes so eloquently about the importance of this virtue. I close today with his words: “When faithfulness is our standard, we are more likely to sustain our engagement with tasks that will never end: doing justice, loving mercy and calling the beloved community into being. Full engagement in the movement called democracy requires no less of us than full engagement in the living of our own lives. We carry the past with us, so must understand its legacy . . . We can see the future only in imagination, so we must continue to dream of freedom, peace, and justice for

everyone. Meanwhile, we live in the present moment, with its tedium and terror, its fears and hopes, its incomprehensible losses and its transcendent joys. It is a moment in which it often feels as if nothing we do will make a difference, and yet so much depends on us.”

May we summon our courage to engage. Our democracy needs our faithfulness. May it be so and Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Frost, Edward. *With Purpose and Principle: Essays about the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism*. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998) 71.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>iv</sup> Lappe, Frances Moore. *At Democracy's Edge*. Posted on Worldwatch Institute at <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/734>

<sup>v</sup> See the Lobbying Database available on OpenSecrets.org at <http://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/index.php>

<sup>vi</sup> Lappe article.

<sup>vii</sup> Palmer, Parker. *Habits of the Heart: The Courage to Create a Politics Worth of the Human Spirit*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011) 41.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid 76-77.

<sup>x</sup> Von Stamwitz, Alicia. “If Only We Would Listen: Parker J. Palmer On What We Could Learn About Politics, Faith, and Each Other” in *The Sun*, 6. November, 2012.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.