

DEMOCRACY IS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE
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This past May, the congregation of this church adopted a resolution in support of Same Sex Marriage. I am proud of this church. I am proud not so much because of its exact words, although I believe it is a well-crafted and fine statement. Even more, I am proud of the way this congregation took the time and did the hard work to engage one another in debate and discussion, really to listen to one another, in order to fashion a statement that had broad, although not unanimous support. I know that a number of you who cared deeply about the issue struggled hard for many months. I know that it was frustrating at times. I know, because some of you called me at home. I also applaud those who had the courage to vote no as their conscience called them to vote.

Democratic process at times can seem so very messy and difficult. Tempers can become frayed. Even at the annual meeting at which the resolution was adopted there were last minute amendments and amendments to amendments, and confusion about Robert's Rules to work through, all which was necessary and important. It was necessary and important because there were still people who needed to be heard. As imperfect as the process may have seemed, I commend this congregation for staying the course long enough to reach a good outcome.

Was it perfect? Of course not. As Vaclav Havel reminded the United States Congress, "Democracy in the full sense of the word will always remain an ideal." It is always a "horizon" which we can only approach but never fully attain.

What was remarkable about President Havel's address to our American Congress was that he spoke about democracy, not as a political system, not as set of rules and procedures, not as voting, but what was remarkable was that he talked about democracy in religious terms. He talked about democracy as a consciousness that precedes physical being, a consciousness of the larger reality of being in which we have our true life and being. He talked about democracy as a spiritual practice.

He talked about the necessary salvation of human civilization from all that would destroy it. He talked about this in spiritual terms. He talked about such salvation in terms of the human heart, of the human power to reflect, of the spiritual quality of human modesty or humility, of our human responsibility for the common good. He talked about all this as transcending

personal, national, and company selfish and narrow interests. He talked about democracy in terms of the human spirit.

We don't often think of democracy in spiritual terms. What I suggest this morning is that, in fact, democracy *is* a spiritual practice. Typically we think of spiritual practice as something we do in private - prayer, meditation, journal writing, yoga, walking in the woods, retreats to a beautiful and quiet place. Democracy is none of these. It certainly doesn't feel like it. But democracy, I say, is profoundly a spiritual practice.

Recall for a moment our Unitarian Universalist principles. If we take seriously our affirmation of the worth and dignity of each person, if we believe that justice, equity and compassion are essential to our relationships with one another, then we are called necessarily to practice democracy.

The worth and dignity of each person is a radically spiritual affirmation. It means that we recognize and honor the spark of divinity, the part of God, that dwells at the core of each human being. To disrespect another person, to diminish their worth, to dishonor their essential reality as a human being, is therefore a blasphemy against the very heart of being itself.

So, if we take the worth and dignity of each person seriously, we are necessarily called to a certain order of social relationships. This goes to the very heart of religion, because most fundamentally religion is about how we are bound to one another in relationships that are just, equitable, and compassionate, in relationships of mutual respect and high esteem, high esteem for each and every human being, even those we may consider our enemy. This is a totally radical affirmation. It's not so very new. It is at the heart of what Jesus, for example, taught.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm individual rights of conscience at the same time we affirm the use of democratic process. Rights of conscience and democracy go together. It is our fifth principle. But where we so often go wrong is that we want to reduce rights of conscience to a personal freedom to do our own thing, to pursue whatever we may think is our personal happiness, but which too often is only our selfish interest.

As a spiritual practice, rights of conscience are not about a freedom for narrow selfish interest. As Vaclav Havel implied in his speech, as western religion has long taught, what the right of conscience is really about is our liberation from our own ego in order to find our true lives in relationship to others; it is about our working together for a more a more just and loving, beautiful world.

So often we think of democracy in terms of majority rule and individual liberty. So often I hear people, even certain Unitarian Universalists, equate democracy with insisting on getting one's own way, even if it means devaluing other people's opinions, feelings, beliefs, and way of life with whom they disagree.

No, democracy is not about getting one's way. The ideal of democracy is just the opposite. The practice of democracy involves such spiritual values as patience, a respect for difference, humility, and a deep willingness to listen to the other person, and a mind and heart so open that we may even be changed by the encounter.

What was so remarkable about President Havel's speech, was that he did not talk about democracy as a particular political system. Democracy, he said, was a way of being, a way of being that begins with our consciousness of the larger reality of being in which we all have our life. Democracy, he said, derives from consciousness. It comes from faith. Not the other way around. So much of what masquerades as democracy these days, is in fact political propaganda and partisan politics wrapping itself in the cloak of espoused values and lots of banners or flags. Values are too often paraded on the surface, but are in fact exploited to serve the selfish agendas and narrow minded motives of partisan interests.

But at its core, democracy is not about constitutions, or majority rule, or Robert's Rules. These are merely systems or devices that help democracy work. In the same way, meditation is not about a particular posture or set of words or techniques, although these can help make meditation work. Democracy is about our developing a consciousness of the larger reality of our being that then may call us to social responsibility, whether in our homes, our congregation, our places of work, or the public square.

It's interesting that Jesus used a political metaphor for the key spiritual ideal he was teaching, a social order based on love and just relationships. He called this spiritual ideal the Kingdom of God. Kingdoms were a form of social order his followers knew about. But his Kingdom was not any particular form of political system. His Kingdom was about our consciousness of the larger reality of being that is potential among us each moment. His Kingdom was about a community of human relationships that derives from an awareness of the divinity in each person, relationships of compassion and respect.

Jesus' Kingdom of God remains even today a distant ideal, a horizon that one can never attain, but only approach. Today, we could use a different metaphor. Perhaps we could say the

Democracy of God, or the democracy of the Human Spirit, to represent the same ideal, a horizon, that we may never attain, but can strive constantly to approach.

So, if democracy is a spiritual discipline to practice, what might this practice look like? As a spiritual practice, democracy is about deepening our consciousness. It is about forming our conscience as a motivation for service and social advocacy. Let me tell you a story.

Yesterday, I did a memorial service for an elderly woman, age 96. Her name was Helen Mann. Three years ago, she had written me from her retirement home in Florida. She had seen an article in the newspaper, in Florida, about our church selling the 11 pieces of historic silver to help restore this magnificent building, and it had stirred cherished memories from her childhood. She hoped, when the time came, that she could have her committal service conducted here in this church. I replied that I would be honored.

As a young girl she had attended Sunday School here. Her family had been Episcopalian. She was an independent minded young woman who thought for herself, even as a child. By the age of 12 or 13, she realized that she no longer believed what her church was teaching. A friend invited her to come to her church, this church, the Unitarian Church. She wrote about how she sat with her class at the "Round Table" at the front of the church. (I know from old timers no longer with us that it was this table right here. There were no class rooms downstairs at that time.) Helen wrote me that the Unitarian principles she learned here in Quincy became her guide for the rest of her life. Indeed, as I came to learn later, at the age of 90, she helped found a new Unitarian Universalist church in Venice, Florida, where she was living.

Helen was an avid reader, especially of biography, John Adams for one, and history. She enjoyed reading for its own sake. But she also used her reading to inform her conscience, which then inspired her community service, and guided her social action for the common good. During the civil rights movement, she read as much as she could about race relations and the struggle for equality and racial justice in America. She considered the matter from many viewpoints and then made her conclusions. At her age and within her social circle, this was no easy task. She found herself at last summoned to action. She marched with Martin Luther King; she was nearly a generation older than he was. She supported one of her daughter's work to register voters in the south. At a public school in Roxbury, she taught Black mothers how to read stories to their children.

She followed the women's movement with interest. In her mid-seventies, this was in the 1980's, Helen volunteered at a women's correctional facility in Burlington, Vermont, where she formed mentoring relationships with a number of the women incarcerated there.

I tell this story, because I believe Helen Mann lived democracy as a spiritual practice. In terms of what Vaclav Havel said, she understood that "consciousness" does come before "being." Her community involvement and social action always followed after the deepening of her consciousness. Helen deepened her consciousness through reading, and also through her participation in her church congregation. She would read many different viewpoints of an issue. She would consider a matter from many perspectives. Often, she would come to a new way of thinking. She would gently but firmly encourage others to open their minds also to new ways of thinking. At times, she would find herself summoned to some particular action. This action was not motivated by partisan politics. It was not because it was a popular cause. In fact, because of her time and place, her commitment to racial justice came at price, as it cost her a number of friendships. But Helen was a woman who kept the counsel of her own conscience, and she remained steadfast in her commitments.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the right of individual conscience *and* the use of democratic process as one of our essential principles. But these are not just fine words to use in preambles of resolutions. These are not simply rules by which we choose to govern ourselves here at United First Parish Church.

Democracy is a spiritual practice. As a spiritual practice, democracy is about cultivating certain attitudes of mind and heart, and certain qualities of consciousness and spirit. And by these spiritual attitudes and qualities, it is then to engage in civic life to help society approach closer the horizon of true democracy.

One of the reasons why I believe that our participation to the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO) is so important, is that at its core, GBIO provides an excellent arena within which we can practice democracy as a spiritual discipline. Broad based community organizing requires that we get outside of our comfort zone, to cross over barriers that separate us from others - barriers of race and neighborhood, barriers of religion, and of social and economic class. It calls us to engage at a one-to-one personal level with other people who may at first seem very different from us, with whom we may disagree on many issues, but with whom we in fact share a common concern for the good of all. The spiritual practice of democracy requires deep listening

to the other person, to let yourself become open to learning a new way of seeing things, a new perspective, a new truth. This requires patience and acceptance. It deepens our spiritual consciousness.

GBIO is currently working with health care workers and managers of nursing homes to achieve better working conditions, and greater dignity and respect for the care givers in these homes. This work calls us to establish relationships of understanding and respect with workers, who in this area are most Haitian and of different religious beliefs than our own. It calls us to work with union leaders and managers. It calls us to go to places in our own psyche where at first we may not be comfortable. The practice of democracy is spiritual work. (You will be hearing more about this current GBIO initiative in the weeks ahead.)

Helen Mann showed by her life, that democracy as a spiritual practice means that we open ourselves to being changed, to having our consciousness so deepened that we are called out of ourselves each in our own way to the work of saving human civilization and this beautiful planet Earth from all the terrible forces that are working to degrade and tear these apart. At the same, the practice of democracy in the spiritual sense is work that can also transform our lives.

GBIO is only one way of doing democracy as a spiritual practice, a way that several of us here are following. For each of you there will a right way, a way in which your conscience calls you engage in relationship with others for a better world - whether it is to create beauty in collaborative workshop, or to work for social transformation through GBIO, or to advocate for preserving the environment in your local neighborhood, or to build a World Citizen's Party. The possible list is unlimited.

The important thing is that whatever the task, to be a spiritual practice that deepens your soul, your motivation must come from a place of faith. It must come from a personal consciousness of the larger reality of being, a consciousness of God, a consciousness that you regularly cultivate through reflection, reading, one to one deep listening, meditation or prayer.

As any spiritual practice, democracy is a practice that takes commitment. It takes steady discipline and hard work. It takes patience and tolerance. Most of all, it means allowing our lives to be deepened and transformed in ways that let us approach closer the spiritual horizon, a world community of true justice, liberty, and peace for all, the Democracy of God.