

## **A HEART FOR DEMOCRACY**

**A sermon given for the ‘What We Believe’ 2018/19 sermon series  
by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on  
Sunday, May 5th, 2019**

**In fifth grade, I was elected class president at my parochial school. My political ascendancy had started in the fourth grade, when I was elected our class treasurer. Looking back, I cannot recall there being any funds for me to manage in that role, but I remember the satisfaction of occupying it, and I remember it increasing my interest in student government. When I was elected class president the next year, I was the first girl our grade had ever elected to highest classroom office. It didn’t seem likely that I would win, honestly, so my friends and I were surprised when the campaign turned out not to be an exercise in futility. The symbolic victory was quite significant for me and for my classmates, because it proved that elections could change things, including our notion of what was possible.**

**In his book, Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create A Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit, Quaker author Parker J. Palmer considers democracy both as as a system of governance and a communal spiritual practice. He explores at some length what one French essayist characterized as those “habits of the heart” that encourage us to stay with a fairly chaotic democratic process. According to Palmer, the two places in America today where we are most likely to form our habits of the heart are in “classrooms and**

**congregations”, and we have to hope that these habits — these moral modes of being human — are healthy ones.**

**As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, UU Wellesley Hills is self-governing in keeping with our custom of congregational polity. So every year, we hold an annual meeting where member vote in the leaders of our governing board and ratify our operating budget and take care of those business items that make this place a going concern for everyone here. Our annual meeting is slated for June, and I hope most of you will be there, participating in important conversations and helping build this community. As Palmer notes, the deepest and most demanding question in congregational life is always: “How can we create relationships among us that bring... to life ways of being together that are congruent with what we teach and preach?”**

**All this past year, I have been preaching a sermon series about what we UUs believe, using the Rev. David O. Rankin’s familiar ten-point outline as a guide. His ninth point is this: “We believe in the necessity of the democratic process. Records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism, so that people might govern themselves.” I have spent a good deal of time reading and re-reading Rev. Rankin’s words for several months now, so I’ve come to notice how careful his phrasing is. We do not believe in the efficacy or superiority of the democratic process, but rather in its necessity. As faith claims go, that’s a fairly modest one to stake — something along the unassuming lines of, well, this is necessary... Choose the inflection you prefer.**

**But however you say it, that statement ought to be heartfelt. Because ours is a non-creedal tradition in which we have no creed dictated for us as a collective, we need to have our individual credos at the ready. A credo is of course a person's guiding belief; its etymological origins are thought to be found in a Latin phrase meaning, "I give my heart." Giving one's whole heart is a daunting action to take — and perhaps a prerequisite to our being fully human.**

**"The human heart, this vital core of the human self, holds the power to destroy democracy or to make it whole," Palmer declares, adding that the future of democracy will "depend heavily on generations of American citizens cultivating the habits of the heart that support political wholeness." This congregation is meant to serve as a place for such cultivation. Maybe the habit of the heart that is most necessary to living in a democracy is knowing heartbreak, again and again.**

**Democracy is rife with disputes and disappointments. Think about it — every election is yet another opportunity for defeat. Unless an election is uncontested, there is a winner and a loser. We hope that the best candidate prevails or the best proposition carries, but we also know that it's not always the case. Whenever our rhetoric about democracy gets too lofty, we need to check it against some difficult realities. In order for democracies to succeed, its citizens must maintain a degree of humility. We have to be willing to correct for any errors we make, understanding that there indeed will be errors and also the consequences of those errors to confront.**

**Ideally, a democracy should be far more interested in what is right than who is right. Its commitment should be to privileging principles above personalities and above even our own personal predispositions. In a bit of American folklore, President Abraham Lincoln is said to have replied to a supporter who told him God was on their side, “My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.” We tend to believe that we are right most of the time, but democracy asks us to compare — routinely — the dictates of our conscience in an ongoing contest.**

**“Protecting our right to disagree is one of democracy’s gifts, and converting this inevitable tension into creative energy is part of democracy’s genius,” Palmer writes. He cautions us against both a “corrosive cynicism” and an “irrelevant idealism” and asks that we consider democracy in all its complexity, in “its indisputable achievements and its unfulfilled promise” alike.**

**According to Palmer, one of the most fundamental tasks in any democracy is “standing and acting with hope in the ‘tragic gap.’ On one side of that gap, we see the hard realities of the world, realities that can crush our spirits and defeat our hopes. On the other side of that gap, we see real-world possibilities, life as we know it could be” but is not yet and might not be for a little while longer.**

**Only when we widely acknowledge that tragic dimension can “shared heartbreak... build a footbridge of mutual understanding on which we can walk toward each other,” Palmer contends. “The shadow side of any movement is the belief that ‘we are right and everyone else is**

wrong,' a belief that goes unchallenged when people talk only with those who share their views” and revile the opposition. Democracies can only survive if the winners and loser consistently demonstrate a degree of regard for each other. Humans can survive only if we honor the extent to which we are ultimately interconnected.

In congregations such as ours, people hear interconnection taught as a core religious value and they also see it modeled in our everyday interactions. “Our faith and knowledge thrive by exercise,” the poet John Milton wrote. Because we UUs believe in the necessity of the democratic process, we work on committees, and often put things up for discussion and then up for a vote. Here we must develop a capacity to tolerate our differences of opinion and we must remain discerning, too.

“Can we be equitable? Can we be generous?” author Terry Tempest Williams asks us. “Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions?” If we can, we will discover that we have a heart not only for democracy, but also for one another. In an email I recently got from a member here at UU Wellesley Hills, I was asked, “Don't you just love working with a congregation of opinionated folks?” Actually, I do. Besides, as you may have noticed by now, I happen to have some distinct opinions of my own, as well as abiding affection for you all.

People in congregations are invited to an ethic of what Palmer calls “deep hospitality”, directed to welcome the stranger in their midst. The setting in and of itself provides a cultural corrective. American society is increasingly isolated and privatized, which results in

**Americans growing more fearful and anxious, because people who in might have in the past been neighbors are now relative strangers to them. “Becoming people who offer hospitality to strangers requires us to open our hearts time and again to the tension created by our fear of ‘the other,’” Palmer observes. “Only from such a heart can hospitality flow—toward the stranger and toward all that we find alien and unsettling.” The stranger is no longer the enemy; the stranger suddenly has something to offer us.**

**Our congregations should settle us and unsettle us at the same time. Like American democracy, congregational life occupies aspirational space; it cannot help but fall short of its ideals, and the attitudes we hold about that failure matter. We routinely find ourselves standing in that gap between a community as it is currently and as it could be, or as it ought to be. Palmer calls congregations such as our “communities of congruence” where “people gather to support each other’s resolve to live by the heart’s imperatives. . . .They help people master the information, theories, and strategies that will allow them to advance their cause,” he notes. They give us arenas where we try, fail, and try again.**

**These communities of congruence can teach us to be faithful to far-off goals. “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,” Palmer concludes. The beloved community is not an exclusive one, but an encompassing one. It embraces our visible and invisible differences. Parker considers “hospitable habits of the heart as a necessity, not an option, for people on a spiritual journey.” For me, this immediately**

**calls to mind Rev. Rankin's insistence on "the necessity of the democratic process" within our own UU faith communities.**

**Democracy requires that we be hospitable toward one another most especially when we would rather not, that we somehow agree to allow tensions to exist between us. "The genius of the human heart lies in its capacity to use these tensions to generate insight, energy, and new life," Parker maintains. Too much of its genius - its ethical and spiritual genius - is lost if we minimize or misrepresent the difference between us. We need to take advantage of our opportunities for exchange and encounter and not retreat into what Palmer calls "lifestyle enclaves", where the people we surround ourselves with share our same opinion and ambitions almost precisely. Our vistas narrow then; they are in danger of no longer being truly democratic.**

**Our American democracy is in peril now; we all sense that. But the very nature of democracy is perilous, as Palmer and others will remind us. The 2016 presidential election was damaging to this country, however you might understand its outcome personally. Obviously, the rhetoric was debased and debasing. The considerable difference between the popular vote and electoral college count alone prompted substantial concern; it also called our attention to considerable divides in our national landscape. Our democracy can thrive even if our situation is dynamic, but it cannot survive if it is exceedingly polarized. More Americans understand that today.**

**Of course we need a more perfect union - America has never not needed a more perfect Union, as we have gradually extended the democratic franchise a select group of white men to include men**

**formerly enslaved and eventually women. All this took too long, and the changes many of you are working for in this congregation will take longer than you would like and longer than seems right. I admire the depth of your commitment to crucial causes such as ending voter suppression, enacting campaign finance reform, diversifying our candidate pools, and adopting rank-choice voting, a model which holds tremendous potential for future elections.**

**In just a year, we will have another presidential election, and the field of candidates for 2020 is crowded with candidates who represent more of America's diversity than we have seen on the national stage in any prior election cycle. I make no predictions at this point, and much as I hope that the next election will heal some of the harm caused in the last one, I understand it may not. What's been broken must be repaired, and then when it gets broken again, it will require additional repair. As citizens, we need to know only have the stomach for uncertainty and disappointment, but we have to have a heart for democracy and the courage to champion it even after it has failed us. We have to always believe in "the necessity" of it, as Rev. Rankin reminds us.**

**At its best, democracy is a rigorous moral education. As President Lincoln said in his first Inaugural address, it can call to "the better angels of our nature" and inspire in us a spiritual discipline of continuous self-correction. We have to develop and maintain a capacity for this self-correction throughout our lifetimes. We need to be taught democratic habits in our classrooms and congregations — and we have to learn them by heart. The success of democracy in our local communities and in this country depends on that.**



**“As history consistently demonstrates, heart talk can yield actions just as practical as those driven by conventional forms of power,” writes Palmer, and if we are broken-hearted by the state of American politics today, that is as it should be, because a “broken-open heart is a source of power as well as compassion—the power to bring down whatever diminishes us and raise up whatever serves us well.” The failures of democracy are announcing themselves, but we can mobilize a response that helps us develop a greater trust in one another, a confidence that people can govern themselves when they are equipped and encouraged to do so well. We UUs cling to that as an article of faith.**

**In the sixth grade, I stepped down from student government at my parochial school, so my political career began and peaked rather early in life. Still, my turns as class treasurer and president were instructive and inspiring experiences; they convinced me that the least likely collectives can make surprising things possible. I cannot testify to my effectiveness in office, but I remember being humbled by the trust my classmates put in me and made conscious, suddenly, of the burdens and risks public servants are asked to assume. What democracy attempts to do - in congregations, classrooms, communities - is aggregate the shared wisdom, gather all our knowing together, so that we are learning from one teaching one another almost continuously. Let’s not lose sight of that healing and heartening curriculum now.**

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