

Democracy: Permeable or Permanent?

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We call him former president Obama. But while he has moved off stage into the life of a private citizen, many of his speeches as president will remain with us forever. One that will stick with me in particular were his remarks at his second ordination. He said, *“Democracy, in a nation of 300 million, can be noisy and messy and complicated. We have our own opinions. Each of us has deeply held beliefs. And when we go through tough times, when we make big decisions as a country, it necessarily stirs passions, stirs up controversy. That won't change after tonight. And it shouldn't.”* Those words are alive today as they have never been.

President Obama's thoughts, on the messy, noisy, essential nature of our democracy – connected nicely to an editorial published in The New Yorker, in July of 1943. Written by E.B. White. White received a letter from the Writers' War Board, a domestic propaganda machine during World War II. The board had written, asking for a statement on the meaning of democracy. Here's the response, from E.B. White:

It is presumably our duty to comply with such a request, and it is certainly our pleasure. Surely, the board knows what democracy is. It is the line that forms on the right. It is the don't, in don't shove. It is the hole in the stuffed shirt through which the sawdust slowly trickles; the dent in the high hat. Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right, more than half of the time. It is the feeling of privacy in the voting booths; the feeling of communion in the libraries; the feeling of vitality everywhere. Democracy is the letter to the editor. Democracy is the score at the beginning of the ninth. It is an idea which hasn't been disproved yet; a song, the words of which have not gone bad. It's the mustard on the hot dog, and the cream in the rationed coffee. Democracy is a request from a War Board - in the middle of the morning, in the middle of a war - wanting to know what democracy is.

Thank you, President Obama for your speech, Thank you E.B. White, for your prose. Thank you Leonard Cohen for your song. Yet, despite these lofty, inspirational and pungent words about democracy we all know that something is desperately wrong with democracy and our political system.

The list of noisy, messy and complicated issues are long and lamentable:

Yet history reminds us, despite the sloganeering of this past election, there has never been a golden age of democracy in America that we are trying to get back to. There was never a time in our democracy in which all was well. Can you think of a time when that was so?

What time would that be?

It can't be before 1865,
when some were considered human and others considered chattel?

It can't be before 1920,
when women were not allowed to vote.

It wasn't before the 1965 Civil Rights Act, when I would have been asked how many bubbles were in a bar of soap before I could vote.

NO, There never was a golden age this is because democracy behaves differently than it professes.

Democracy is as elastic as it is rigid. Elastic enough to believe that all people are created equal but rigid enough to count human beings of a darker hue as 3/5th a person.

Democracy is as porous as it is solid. Porous enough for the wind of possibility to lift us off our feet but solid and impenetrable to mimic the chill of an oligarchy

The constitutional democracy is just a piece of paper.

Democracy is both a system of governance and an aspiration.

To make democracy real, to give democracy flesh it has to be in our hands, and it has to be in our hearts.

On the opening page of this timely and soul-stirring book, *Healing The Heart of Democracy*, Parker Palmer clasps our hands through the pages of his book and admits his heartbreak over the sorry state of the nation; he says he feels like "a displaced person in my own land." But he is pulled out of a real case of depression by a personal journey that involves looking at politics through the eye of the heart. Palmer sees the human heart as the first home of democracy. *He asks us*
Can we embrace our questions? Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, without giving up — ever — trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?"

Palmer affirms what so many of us feel who are fed up with business as usual in Washington, D.C., and the odd cultural and media mix of divisiveness, toxicity, passivity, and powerlessness. Throughout the rest of the book, Palmer delineates what it means to practice politics from the heart. He lists five habits of the heart (such as "we must cultivate the ability to hold tension in life-giving ways") which could turn things around in this country.

He then probes the sources of two underlying "heart conditions" which must be curtailed: consumerism and scapegoating.

Consumerism that has made us hungry for stuff and status instead of conversation and community. He sees scapegoating as a scourge that pits us against one another based on deceptions and derision.

He also challenges those facing trying to practice politics from the heart from moving

beyond the "fight or flight" response to those perceived to be enemies. We do not need to look any further than our own families to see this play out over the dinner tables of this past election.

When our impulse to fight is rooted in anger we are unable to hear one another or engage in a change of heart. And when we take flight we run away, quiver or hide in the safety of what is known and comfortable.

Palmer laments the waning of American public life that would encourage us to engage in civil exchanges. With the growing emphasis on private life with family and friends. He would like to see more places and programs to encourage mingling with strangers and opening ourselves to diversity. He salutes Wendell Berry and others who through "the lens of compassionate imagination" have promoted the bounties of public life in a democracy.

Palmer would like to see greater time and energy in churches devoted to developing and enhancing a theology of hospitality to overcome fear of the "other." He examines how television, circles of trust, and cyberspace can be arenas where the habits of the heart can flourish or die.

For Palmer The impulse toward democracy still beats in the American breast, despite his harsh assessment of our current situation, Healing the Heart of Democracy is a hopeful book that lifts up and hallows the heart as a source of inner sight. Palmer believes that the forces of democracy are ultimately stronger.

At the end of the book Palmer sent me on my way rejoicing with the hope that he had planted in my mind and soul. But often like Chinese food a few hours later I am still hungry.

So I am brought back to that age old question, what is my call? what am I to do as Unitarian Universalist? One person, functioning in the small world that I live in from home to work to church? What I can do to end the dysfunctional nature of democracy?

What can you do?

How do we make dysfunctional democracy functional? I would not be a minister if I did not have a few suggestions:

First we must

1. Put perfection aside.

Asking for perfection in government opens the door to totalitarianism, or disappointment. The genius of a constitutional republic democracy is that it recognizes, in its structure, that we are mortal and flawed human beings. The Unitarians and Episcopalians who wrote those documents had high aspirations, but they knew how the world worked. So that's step one put perfection aside.

2. Take our principles seriously.

There is some tension, I admit, between our first principle "the inherent worth and dignity of persons" and the second principle "Justice, equity and compassion in human relations" but we have to be serious about who and what we care about. What are your lines in the sand? I won't vote for someone who isn't serious about ethics and good government. Period there is no lesser of two evils. There are things you believe in and things you will not stand for. And taking your principles seriously isn't just about voting, it is about your whole civic life. Where we donate. Where we live. Where we send our kids to school. How we eat. How we drive?

The goal of Unitarian Universalism is to help us be more whole, more purposeful in our lives. The way we do that is by, every day, voting "for the right to dream of a world where the word politics doesn't stop us in our tracks, and where the word honor still has a few good meanings left.

3. Get local.

So much of what matters in our lives is decided at the local level. School board meetings. City Council. Little groups of part-time public servants, meeting in small rooms, doing the business. Places where a small group of committed citizens can really make a difference. Like when we have a forum and two people meet who go on to start another organization. and all over this region, citizens need to step up. Show up. Organize. Make their case. After they fail, get up and try again. Keep at it. That's the way change happens. And this is where dysfunctional democracy becomes functional.

4. Stay in the Spirit

Democracy is a spiritual task.

This is not, to say that we should allow or promote a particular religion to be required as entry into the civic life. But the aspiration to democracy requires spiritual vision, and spiritual discipline.

Is it not, after all, a claim of faith that all people are equal? Is it not, after all a spiritual claim, that justice is more important than profit.

Theologian Carter Heyward says, *love is a conversion to humanity – a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives.* “Democracy depends on love, real, practical, committed love.

I submit that one of the reasons our democracy seems to be in trouble is because of a lack of love for humanity. And that is a spiritual task. Really, the spiritual task: to love our neighbors as ourselves. Nothing is more important. Nothing is harder to do.

5. Make light, not husks

One son filled the hall with garbage. The other with light.

Our task as participants in democracy is to tell the difference.

What is waste, rubbish,
the appearance of action?

What is real, illuminating, helpful? To tell the difference requires patience, study, engagement, the willingness to change your mind, to engage the facts beyond ideology.

While we can try these five things to re-engage ourselves with the concept of a working democracy in our lives. We have to remain vigilant about the real tension that exists with each of us and the system we live in. We have to remember that the tension to be a democratic democracy is a permanent feature of the American condition. Thomas Jefferson understood that tension at the first inauguration speech

"Equal and exact justice for all. . . of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political; peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none.

...Freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and freedom of person... These principles form the bright constellation which has gone before us, and guided our steps through an age of revolution and reformation. The wisdom of our sages and the blood of our heroes have been devoted to their attainment. They should be the creed of our political faith, the text of civil instruction, the touchstone by which to try the services of those by which to try the services of those we trust; and should we wander from them in moments of error or alarm, let us hasten to retrace our steps and to regain the road which alone leads to peace, liberty, and safety."

We religious liberals seem cursed to live with the tension between energizing hope and the temptation toward paralyzing cynicism. But my friends, cynicism is a luxury of privilege; cynicism is a negative spirituality that in the end only feeds the forces against democracy. We can maintain our hope, and be true to our own religious ideals, if we remember that this very dissonance, this very tension that so often frustrates us, can be creative as well as destructive. This tension has the power to change the direction of our country. This tension can fuel the passion to question, the courage to be prophetic,

and the faith to hope. Yes it is noisy. Yes it is messy, yes it is complicated. But it is our American Democracy.