

This is What Democracy Looks Like

Readings: 'States!' by Walt Whitman
'Perhaps the World Ends Here' by Joy Harjo
'Prayer Ballot' by Luke Stevens-Royer

I lived in Eastern Europe for a few years, as many of you know. I lived in Belgrade, Serbia, and worked with the most courageous people I have ever met, people who risked all they had to speak out for peace, human rights, women's rights, LGBT equality, and an end to religious and ethnic nationalism. Two of those brave people recently received political refugee status in Canada. They are making a new life in Calgary.

My friends and colleagues there knew I was religious and it confused and fascinated them. Because of the history of that region and their political commitments, they had no religious communities. There was no progressive religion for them. There were no sizeable religious communities in Belgrade that encouraged their deep justice commitments – or were even just neutral on these issues. They didn't want to be told by preachers and teachers that women shouldn't work outside the home, that homosexuality was immoral, that God has a favorite ethnic group – and so they didn't do religion. If I was in their shoes, I wouldn't either.

And here I came with my weird American ways and my terrible Serbian language skills and my religious commitments. It was even a faith based program, The Brethren Volunteer Service, that sent me to them. They were confused and fascinated and, as our trust grew and my language skills progressed, we began to talk about it.

I told them about our Unitarian Universalist values, our commitments to the equality of all people, the environment, to peace, and how we strive to live out these commitments every day. I also mentioned that we choose our own leaders – both in our churches and on the associational level – and that was the detail that most surprised them.

They had never heard of a religious community that is democratically organized. The Roman Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, and Muslim communities that they knew were all hierarchical. The people in the pews didn't get to make the decisions about who would lead their church, how the church would run and what the church would do in the world. Hearing about our fifth principle – 'the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large' – surprised them.

I was surprised by their surprise. I grew up Unitarian Universalist and knew no other way to do church. A democratically organized church with the congregation in charge is the only way I had known. I remember my parents serving terms on the board of trustees. I joined my church and cast votes in congregational meetings and at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly when I was still too young to vote in federal elections. The democratic process in churches is the water I've always swum in.

And when I got to seminary and started studying our denominational history, I learned that my Serbian friends were right to be surprised. I learned how exceptional our commitment to democracy is. What we do is rare and precious. Our democratic process, our practice of having the members of the congregation hold the highest authority in the system, is rare and precious. There is no bishop or pope or regional committee or other group that can mandate that this church do anything – though denominational staff and others offer plenty of suggestions of how we might act and hold up best practices for us to consider. It is the members of People's Church who select ministers and elect board members, pass budgets, and decide on the direction of the church. It is all of you who give away some of your power to me and other leaders so we can run things around here. You could take that power back if you wanted. You all could remove me—and other leaders—if you wanted. This is a rare and precious power. Most members of most religious communities have never had anything like this.

The word for what we do is 'congregational polity.' Polity is the fancy academic word for form of governance. Since our highest authority is the congregation, we practice congregational polity. There are other forms of polity – including episcopal polity, which means a bishop is in charge, and Presbyterian polity, which means a council of leaders are in charge.

And this practice and heritage of congregational polity matters. Our religious ancestors, the Puritans, came to this continent in part to practice congregational polity... and the reason that those Puritan communities evolved and changed over nearly four centuries to become Unitarian Universalists is congregational polity. People started asking questions, "Do you need to have had a personal conversion experience to be a member of the church?" "How do we incorporate the newest scholarship and scientific teachings into our understanding of God?" "Do we all need to believe the same thing to be church together?" "How can we be a church for humanists?" "Can we have a woman minister? A queer minister?" There was no bishop or council of leaders to stop people from asking these questions and from experimenting with new ways of doing church. And then other congregations saw what was happening and borrowed the best pieces. This happened again and again and again. Over almost 400 years, this process has led to big and dramatic changes.

If those Puritan ancestors came to join us today, there would be a lot that they wouldn't recognize about us, but they would recognize what we are doing after the service. They would recognize the congregational meeting. They would recognize the practice of church members electing leaders, passing budgets, and making plans together. This piece of our practice is our most direct link to those ancestors.

It matters that we are a democratic institution that engages in a sometimes messy, often inefficient democratic process. It matters because democracy is important here. But we aren't doing this just because it's a great way to run a church. We know that People's Church can be a place to practice the habits of the heart necessary to sustain democracy. Over the past month, I've been leading classes on these habits of the heart. We have had powerful conversations about the practice of welcoming strangers, finding our voice, living with tension, and remembering we are all in this together. This is based on the work of Quaker educator Parker J. Palmer in *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of*

the Human Spirit. In that book, he tells a story about a 1974 visit to an independent black church near Americus, Georgia that has committed itself to be a place to practice democracy.

'I arrived at church early to attend the adult Sunday School class that preceded the worship service,' he writes. 'Thought I do not remember the topic being discussed, I will never forget the way the class was conducted. Only three members were present that morning. Still, these three ran the class as they always did, by Robert's Rules of Order, a set of procedures that helps groups make decisions in an orderly manner while avoiding stalemates and free-for-alls. One member of the class served as presiding clerk, another as recording clerk, and the other as sergeant-at-arms—in case either of the other two got out of hand, or so I supposed.

'I was young then,' Parker continues, 'as white as I am today, walled-off as much as well-off, educated without knowing much—and I was baffled. When I met with the pastor after the worship service, I blurted out, "I don't get it. Why did they have to run the Sunday school class so formally? Why couldn't they just sit and talk to each other?"

"Well," he said, "if you don't get *that*, there's probably a lot you don't get." a comment that got my attention. I did not take notes, so I cannot reproduce his comments verbatim, and yet the imprint of what I learned that morning remains strong to this day:

The people who belong to this church are American citizens who have a long history of being deprived of their rights and shut out of the political process. Thanks to civil rights legislation, those doors are now open to them.

Roadblocks remain, of course, and will for a long time. But now our parishioners can speak up at caucuses, testify at hearings, make their needs and aspirations known to legislators, and do all the things that other citizens do to get their voices heard in the halls of power. As they move into the larger world, we want them to know what it's like to participate in a formal discussion or debate so they will not feel intimidated by what's out there. Robert's Rules of Order gives them a taste of that.¹

I am not suggesting that our religious education classes start operating with Robert's Rules of Order, though I echo the experience of the people at that church. I learned Robert's Rules of Order in church too. I am encouraging us to ponder how we can use the democratic skills we learn and practice here beyond these walls, to make our values real in the world.

We know that voting is only a piece of citizenship and of membership. We know that participating in elections and congregational meetings matters – and we are required to do more than just show up for those events. We are called to do democracy every day, as we build connections with our neighbors, as we show up to committee meetings and county commission meetings and do the unglamorous work of getting our voice heard and making our values real.

¹ Palmer, Parker J. *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. Jossey-Bass, 2011 page 36-38

Walt Whitman, one of the great American poets, reminds us over and over again of the promises of America. Promises that he knew we had not yet lived into. He reminds us that democracy is more than voting, that we are bound together as a nation not by laws, but fundamentally by love. It is the practices that lead to internal transformation. He writes,

'Did you, too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruit in manners, in the highest form of interaction between [people], and their beliefs—in religion, literature, colleges and schools—democracy in all public and private life.'²

Democracy matters. Democracy is a spiritual practice. When we engage deeply in the work of democracy – voting, but also strengthening our neighborhoods, building relationships and coalitions, living with the tensions and conflicts and learning that arises when we value transparency and inclusion over efficiency and hierarchy – we are doing the important spiritual work that will transform us and transform the world. It will come to its flower and its fruit in the highest form of interaction between people and in religion, literature, and all public and private life.

So let us be about our task. Let us use well the rare and precious power that is entrusted to us.

Let us engage in the spiritual practice of democracy.

Let us live our commitment to the democratic process in the congregational meeting that starts in a few minutes – and beyond these walls in the rest of our lives.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

² Whitman, Walt. 'Democratic Vistas' in *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996), p. 980