

“The Hope of Democracy”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered November 8, 2020

Readings

Our first reading this morning is from *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* by Parker Palmer:

“I will not ask us to dial down our differences. Democracy gives us the right to disagree and is designed to use the energy of creative conflict to drive positive social change. Partisanship is not the problem. Demonizing the other side is.”

The second reading is offered by Rev. Theresa Soto titled, “To the people who have mistaken freedom for liberation:”

To be free, you must embrace
the breadth of your own existence
without apology, even if they try to take
it from you. You must know, not that you
can do whatever you want; you are not
a kudzu vine, eating entire hillsides for
the purpose of feeding your own lush life. You
must know instead, that inside you are entire
Universes—milky blue, magenta, and gold—
expanding. But to actually be free, you must
know and you must fight for the entire
Universes inside of everyone else.
Being free is not a license, but
A promise.

Homily

When I arrived in Olympia last Fall, OUUC member Otto Buhls offered this book as a welcome gift: *The Big Book of Answers*. I thought this was an especially thoughtful gift for your brand new minister—who doesn't want answers! It is indeed a big book and many Sundays it helps hold up the chalice that you see on your screen. And, it is indeed full of answers.

This week, when I was seeking answers, praying for answers, I reached for this book. Of course, it didn't tell me who the next president would be or the outcome of the Senate races in Georgia, no surprise there. But it did remind me of the history of our country. In a section labeled "Government and Politics" it told about the revolution against the tyranny of the British crown in the 1770's, the creation of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, our government through these past 244 years: presidents, scandals, wars, division, unity. It helped me remember what an audacious experiment this democracy was, and still is. It reminded me that "United States" is an aspiration.

And, the contradictions. A "new" country built on land already occupied and taken by force, land stolen from the First Peoples. The lofty ideals of liberty and freedom written by men who owned slaves. Creation of a government of the people and for the people, that denied voice and vote to women, black people, anyone who wasn't a white, land-owning man. Our history has been one of struggle to understand, acknowledge and reconcile our ideals and our reality.

Among the many questions I was asking this week were questions that I heard echoed in the breakout rooms and chats: How did we get here? How can people believe lies? Why do people support hate? Who are those people?

And then, I caught myself, noticing the “those people.” Over this past year you’ve heard me about our Unitarian Universalist principles, including the first one about recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Our Universalist heritage says that everyone is worthy. Everyone? Even “those people?” Did I really believe that?

As people of faith, people with beliefs and values, perhaps it’s good that we are challenged on occasion. It helps us notice what we believe, or what we think we believe, and how we behave or not, in line with our beliefs. This week has been one of those times for me, when I am challenged to notice my beliefs and my actions. “Those people”? It was time for me to revisit my values and our first principle.

This is also a time when we as a country are being challenged to notice our beliefs and values, and how we behave. Especially for those of us who are white progressives, these past four years have been challenging, to say the least. Didn’t we make progress on civil rights and the environment? Weren’t things getting better? If nothing else, the voices that we did not hear have been amplified. Those voices of white people who feel ignored and left out of an economy based on access to technology and college education. Voices of those who hold on to an American Dream that seems further and further away. Voices of those who want meaningful work to support their families and a future to look forward to, and who were looking for someone to blame for its lack. Those voices remain.

And, the voices of black, indigenous and people of color who are saying that racism never went away, it just went underground. That violence takes many forms, including institutional and economic. That a culture that values only whiteness and wealth is not healthy for anyone. These voices remain, too.

How did we get here? So many hearts and bodies broken; there is so much despair, isolation, misinformation, hostility, mistrust and disillusionment. How do we help people heal? How do we heal our democracy?

We as a nation have gigantic questions of identity and policy to grapple with: who are “we the people?” What is our responsibility to each other and to the common good? What is not supporting our democracy: voter suppression, gerrymandering, the Electoral College? What about immigration? Health care? Education? Civil rights? A so-called justice system? Are we a democracy and do we want to be? We’re going to have to talk about power. What if democracy means sharing power, and sharing power means that some of us have to let go of some?

There are different opinions about each of these issues and very different experiences that inform those opinions. We do not have a shared reality or even a shared story about reality right now. There are and will be differences. Parker Palmer reminds us that it’s not the differences that are a problem, it’s demonizing the other side that is the problem.

While it matters who the president is, no one person has the ability to heal what is broken and what has been laid bare. It will take many of us. And, we will have to figure out how to do it together.

In our religious tradition, we use covenants to define and support our relationships. While we may not use that language in the public square, I come back to the concept of covenant as foundational to our national healing. Before we can find common ground, we have to first figure out how to be together, how to regain civility so that we can have a conversation in order to even find common ground. And, civility requires commitment and responsibility.

The best definition of civility that I have found is offered by Tomas Spath and Cassandra Dahnke, Founders of the Institute for Civility in Government. They say: Civility is claiming and caring for one's identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process.

This is the difference between freedom and liberation, Rev. Theresa Soto tells us in our reading. Being free means that we know that we contain multitudes, and we know that others do too, and we fight for the multitudes in all life. In that realization, we act as if being free is not a license, but a promise; a promise to listen to understand, a promise to find inherent worth and dignity in others, and a promise to behave in a way that honors that worth and dignity.

The thing about covenants and agreements of any kind is that sometimes we break them. Most of us break our agreements unintentionally. We hurt others with behavior that is unknowing or unskillful. That's when we accept responsibility, make amends, learn and grow.

Some people break agreements intentionally; there are always those who push boundaries and sometimes boundaries need to be pushed. But there are bottom-line agreements that are to be defended, and I believe our first principle, or civility if you prefer, is one of them. Recognizing the inherent worth and dignity in ourselves and others means that we do not harm others and we do not support institutions that harm others. There is no finding common ground with people who deny human worth and who hurt others. We have to be able to recognize and name speech and behavior that is hateful and dehumanizing, and be willing to put boundaries on it in the public square. I am not suggesting that we demonize or ignore those who espouse hate; I am

suggesting that we hold them in compassion, contain their voices, and hold them accountable for their behavior and the behavior they incite.

Our covenants include accountability for and to each other. I'm not talking about shaming others, I am talking about honest, direct feedback about what has happened from different perspectives. We have a lot of history to recover and explore, both the founding story of this country and recent history. It is possible that some of us will feel regret and grief for our part in what has created and caused injustice for others. When we can dialogue with civility, then we can learn and grow.

It is ironic that the most immediate threat to our world right now is something that requires united action to confront: the global pandemic. This past week as we were focused on the election outcome, we had a record number of new cases four days in a row. The most effective tool that we have right now for bringing the pandemic under some measure of control and for saving lives is / masks. Your mask protects me and my mask protects you. You curtail some of your freedom so that I may be healthy, so that I may live. I do the same for you. This simple act is profound, not only in its ability to impact a deadly virus, but in its message to each other. Wearing a mask says to others: You are worthy.

The pandemic is just the most immediate threat to our world; there is another one waiting—climate chaos. Some have said that the pandemic is a test of whether we can come together to face a threat to our very existence. As with the pandemic, “we” in this case is the entire world, and it means that those of us who have so much will have to share with those who have less or little; shared power, wealth, technology, resources. Will be willing to act as if everyone is worthy?

Over this past week, I have come to more fully understand that our democracy is a work in progress. I would even say that the work to build our democracy is a spiritual practice. The spiritual practice of democracy, named in our fifth principle, grounded in our shared values. In the weeks and months ahead, there is much work to do as we practice our democracy, as we heal our democracy. The magnitude seems pretty overwhelming right now.

Here is what I have been pondering. Self-government begins close to home: in our relationships, neighborhoods, city, and faith community. This year, we plan to revisit the OUUC vision, mission and ends or goals. As a community, we have some big questions to ask and answer, too; answers we're not going to find in the Big Book of Answers. I am curious about how we can help build the skills of democracy in our congregation and in our community; skills like listening across differences while setting and keeping boundaries.

I have also heard that many of you want to revisit our congregational covenant, the agreements that we make about being together. Creating and maintaining covenant is also a skill of democracy. How might the practice of democracy show up in our covenant as well?

This past week was historic in so many ways: a record number of people participated in our democratic process by voting, and we elected the first woman to high office, and a woman of color. Democracy is coming to the USA.

Yesterday, President-elect Joe Biden wrote that "democracy beats deep in the heart of America." As we share a moment of silent reflection together, I offer this prayer:

May democracy beat / deep in the heart of people, we the people, all people, and may
the rhythm of our shared heartbeat set the cadence for our march toward liberty and
justice for all.