

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Spreading Democracy...Right Here!”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore May 18, 2008

Spoken Meditation

Spirit of Life
Pervading all time and space
Revered be thy limitless beauty.
Awaken us to thy presence
 and direct us in thy service
To bring your holy potential into being.
Give us our daily sustenance,
Help us to recognize our mistakes,
 and reconcile with those who harm us.
Show us how to live without craving and aversion
Deliver us from the delusions of selfishness
For there is no other satisfying purpose or goal
 than to consciously embody your love.

Sermon

After President Bush’s reelection, in January 2005, he made this statement:

Today, America speaks anew to the peoples of the world: All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for liberty, we will stand with you."

– President George W. Bush, 1/20/05

Passionately supporting freedom and democracy has been a central theme of Bush’s presidency. This week I’ve read a number of his speeches looking for the principles underneath his support for democracy and I think I found them.

On November 6, 2003, at the US Chamber of Commerce 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, he articulated those principles, interestingly, pragmatically grounded in “success” as the measure of goodness:

There are, however, essential principles common to every successful society, in every culture. Successful societies limit the power of the state and the power of the military -- so that governments respond to the will of the people, and not the will of an elite. Successful societies protect freedom with the consistent and impartial rule of law, instead of [selectively] applying ... the law to punish political opponents. Successful societies allow room for healthy civic institutions -- for political parties and labor unions and independent newspapers and broadcast media. Successful societies guarantee religious liberty -- the right to serve and honor God without fear of persecution. Successful societies privatize their economies, and secure the rights of property. They prohibit and punish official corruption, and invest in the health and education of their people. They recognize the rights of women. And instead of directing hatred and resentment against others, successful societies appeal to the hopes of their own people.

I like these essential principles, though I'd make a slight modification for appreciating the value of publicly held resources like parks and essential utilities. I'd also tweak the statement on the rights of private property when they negatively influence public welfare like toxic waste injection wells, strip mining, and making your property a safe haven for rats and cockroaches.

Given the value of these principles, I wonder how well *we* are doing at spreading democracy right here at home? Democracy isn't something that is all or nothing. There are levels of participation and involvement in democratic processes.

I suspect just about everyone in this room is registered to vote and votes in almost every election. We have a strong commitment to democracy in this congregation and in our Unitarian Universalist principles and purposes. Our former minister in the 1960's, Nick Cardell, fought hard to end the five-dollar vote. In those days, the Albany political machine would pay their people five dollars to turn out and vote the right way. A number of our women and a few men have been involved in the League of Women Voters. (My mother was President of the League in Newark, Delaware, my hometown) We turn out at public hearings, go to school board meetings, common council meetings, write letters to the editor, follow issues in the newspaper, and generally take our citizenship very seriously as a personal commitment to support democracy. It is an enduring sense of pride for me in my community work that we have been and are an activist congregation.

Activism is on the rise this year with Hillary Clinton and Barrack Obama running for President. New voters are turning out in overwhelming numbers. The race for the Democratic Party nominee has captured the interest and imagination of the world. I

found this out traveling in Transylvania in April. Two candidates who couldn't vote 150 years ago have a shot at holding the highest office in the land. This is a significant moment in the history of western democracy.

For me, going into the voting booth has a spiritual dimension. I remember the lives lost in the Revolutionary War and the hardship endured, so colorfully illustrated by contemporary historical biographers of our founders like David McCullough. I think about those pictures of people holding up their purple fingers after voting in the first election in Iraq. They risked their lives to show their desire for a form of government that will listen to them. Implicit in democracy is the belief that whatever is good and holy works through individual people like you and me. In some both mysterious and pragmatic way, the will of the people is the best way to ensure a fair and just government.

Many people, however, in the neighborhood across Central Avenue from us do not feel this way. For a constellation of reasons that date back to the seventeenth century, people in the grip of multigenerational poverty do not feel like they are full citizens.

On First and Second Streets in the West Hill neighborhood, many see government as the rule of the elites that doesn't follow the will of *their* people. As undercover police profile their children at six years old on the basketball court, they don't experience a sense of the impartial rule of law. They watch their children prepared for incarceration before they reach adulthood as drug abusing suburban teens get off with a wrist slap. Instead of participating in local economic activity, they watch roadblocks thrown up when they try to start their own businesses. It is really hard for them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps when authorities will not let them put on their own shoes. They see who is driving in to pick up their drugs in the hood. They see who is cruising Central Avenue looking for prostitutes. They see the building codes selectively enforced to punish political enemies. They *don't* see the corruption that protects these people being punished.

What they receive, instead of fairness and justice, is resentment and hatred.

I want to tell you about two meetings I attended on Tuesday. The first was a meeting of the ARISE (or A Regional Initiative Supporting Empowerment) Clergy to hear about the problems of reentry for people who have served their time in prison, paid their debt to society and are now ready to return and reintegrate into the community. Most of these people who were formerly incarcerated, with the emphasis on the word 'people,' come out of jail highly motivated to succeed and not return again. The problem though, is that our government agencies do not have adequate resources to house and guide them. In a profound deficit of humanitarianism and good economic

sense, the lack of support for reentry and reintegration with society means that many of these individuals feel forced to re-offend to get access to the resources they need, like bus fare, like first month's rent on a room, like a cell phone that a potential employer can return a call to. Because of the lack of adequate support and the hardships of reintegration, these people slip back into criminal behavior, get caught, become classified as repeat offenders and locked up for a very long time at a huge public expense, on the order of 40,000 dollars a year per person. We'd save hundreds of thousands of dollars if we discharged people from prison and gave them \$5,000 to spend in certain ways to help them get set up again.

The economic stupidity here is profound. But the inhumanity is far, far worse. The great wrong is the crushing of a person's soul.

The second meeting I attended on Tuesday was the monthly meeting of the West Hill Ministerial Fellowship that rotates in different churches. I was the host of this meeting here in Channing Hall. Our special guest speaker was the University at Albany Dean of the School of Social Welfare, Katherine Briar Lawson. She is one of the pearls of our community who works just across the street from us. She told us about the different creative interventions she has done in Miami, Utah and here in Albany to address some of the problems I've been discussing today. She told us about her experience of coming to Albany and immediately having one of her professors knocked down by students at the Philip Schuyler Elementary School.

She set up a meeting to talk with the principal. She suggested they work to set up a time dollar store so the children can do good things and get time dollars that they can collect and redeem for the school supplies they needed and their parents couldn't or didn't supply them. The principal broke down in tears as he was expecting a severe reprimand from her rather than help with improving the school. That elementary school went from one of the worst schools to one of the best with the assistance of her interventions.

Dean Briar Lawson is very interested in working in the West Hill neighborhood to bring the latest understanding of what works to break the cycle of multigenerational poverty to us and writing grants and lending students and professors to support the effort.

I can't tell you how excited I was to hear her offer for it filled a void for me in trying to lift that neighborhood. I don't have the vision of what might work to deal with the demoralization, discouragement and lack of hope I find there. The dean has a much larger view and understanding of what might work in these situations. And they are all grounded in our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

The place I have found hope is in the eyes of recovering addicts and the formerly incarcerated who have a vision of a better life for themselves. I believe we have a moral imperative to help those who want to help themselves succeed. For their empowerment provides the hope for others mired in hopelessness.

One small step we can take to spread democracy in our neighborhood is register people to vote. To tell someone who may feel worthless that their vote matters is an invitation to empowerment. It can be an emotional moment as a person smiles or on occasion even tears up as they fill out the form.

While we're working on our Habitat for Humanity house on Odell Street in the South End this summer, some of us on the ARISE Core team will be taking a break from sawing boards and pounding nails to walk around the neighborhood and invite people to register to vote. The first and second Fridays in June from 4 to 6, there will be a registration drive in West Hill starting at the Albany United Methodist Society on First Street. In September, we'll be knocking on doors in this neighborhood around us to register people as we have many students who live in this area. Everywhere we go, we'll be asking people what their neighborhood concerns are and inviting them to work on solutions.

Abbie Hoffman put it well:

Democracy is not something you believe in or a place to hang your hat, but it's something you do. You participate. If you stop doing it, democracy crumbles.

If you believe in the value of democracy do something to support it. One thing you can do to support it is join us on the streets of Albany registering people to vote. Registering people to vote is holy work for Unitarian Universalists, maybe even a sacrament. In the process you may help someone rediscover their inherent worth and dignity, and maybe even ... your own.

Benediction

In about half an hour, we'll start worshipping in a different way as we hold our First Annual Meeting in Emerson Community Hall. I invite you to stay, whether you are a member or not (after you move your car out of the SUNY lot), to witness Unitarian Universalist style democracy in action. Jerome Nathanson believes there may be some spiritual benefit for you in it. He said:

The price of the democratic way of life is a growing appreciation of people's differences, not merely as tolerable, but as the essence of a rich and rewarding human experience.

Go in peace. Make peace. Be at peace. AND return for the annual meeting.