**Us vs. Us**

Delivered by Joseph Bednarik at Skagit UU Fellowship, November 8, 2020

Every person.

Consider that two-word phrase for a thoughtful moment: *Every* person.

Unitarian Universalism is guided by a foundational principle that includes the phrase “every person”: “The inherent worth and dignity of *every* person.”

It is important to note that this principle is precise in *not* bringing to mind generalized multitudes, as in the phrase “all people,” but rather the specificity of “every person.”

* Every person with a name
* Every person with a face
* Every person with a story
* *Every* person with worth and dignity
* Every person with value

How succinct and unequivocal our first principle.

And, frankly, how *challenging*.

At another congregation, I recorded—during the heat of election season—a sermon that focused on our first principle and afterward a congregant—the volunteer cameraperson who was wearing a dark black mask emblazoned with four large white letters—V O T E—approached me and said “Nice sermon, but I take issue with what you said. There’s at least one person I know without any inherent worth and dignity.”

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Dick Cheney.”

For those of you who need a quick refresher:

Dick Cheney was the Vice President for George W. Bush, and who was considered by many to be the *actual* president when it came to running the country and exercising shrewd political power. To many, President Bush was, in essence, a ventriloquist dummy for the mastermind that was Dick Cheney.

This brief conversation with the masked cameraperson—calling the phrase “every person” into question—took place, out loud and behind masks, within the sanctuary of a Unitarian Universalist fellowship.

Within an empty sanctuary on a weekday when the sermon was recorded out of an abundance of caution for the health of the local community during a global pandemic.

Within a sanctuary where during the previous sixty minutes of recording,

* candles were lit,
* hymns sung,
* silence held,
* poems read,
* piano played,
* joys celebrated,
* sorrows felt,
* and *attention* called forth and cultivated.

Each and every element intended to call forth our better angels, to allow us to access our deepest humanity, and feel a genuine grandeur of spirit.

Looking at the masked congregant, I tried to figure out how to respond. How to *responsibly* respond.

“Well,” I said. “I guess that’s the growing edge of our religious practice: to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of each and every Dick Cheney.”

Because, to be sure, there are millions of Dick Cheneys.

People we don’t agree with and seem to take special delight in running rough-shod over the values we try to bring into the world.

The eyes above the black and white VOTE mask just stared back at me in silence. While I couldn’t read their entire face, I could palpably sense their incredulity.

We all know that religious practice can be challenging when it meets the hard-ball political world where lawyers, guns, and money have control over so many levers of power.

The Dalai Lama’s sublime message of “My religion is kindness” or Jesus’s “Love thy neighbor as thyself” gets patted on the head and told to scurry off and enjoy some cookies and milk.

And now consider this two-word phrase for a thoughtful moment: Democratic process.

The guiding principles of Unitarian Universalism include the phrase “democratic process” in the fifth principle: “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

I hope we all held this principle close to our hearts this election season.

A proper “democratic process” recognizes that every person—every worthy and dignified person—is included, listened to, and that their voice is heard and their vote counted. By doing so, every person becomes *invested* in a fair and free democratic process while co-creating and caring for the community.

As Unitarian Universalists, we should be absolutely thrilled with this recent election—not because of the results, per se, but because of the *participation*. This excerpt from *USA Today:*

“Let’s take a moment to celebrate the voters and election officials who pulled off a triumph of civic participation in modern American politics. About 160 million people voted in the 2020 general election. This is the most number of people who have voted in *any* American election…

[and] the United States experienced record levels of voter engagement.”

Congratulations, us! And this happened in the midst of a global pandemic! In fact, it happened *because* of the pandemic, which forced the necessity of mail-in ballots. Two-thirds of those eligible to vote participated!

It’s as if those powerful two-word phrases of this religion—“every person” and “democratic process”—were combined in powerful ways.

That said, I trust that you felt strained during the long slog and bitter fight that has been the 2020 election. Especially during this last week. I know I have. I barely slept on election night, lying wide awake at three o’clock in the morning. I tossed and turned and tried to get back to sleep, but whose fooling who? I climbed out of bed and trudged downstairs to check on the Presidential election results. I did so with a deep sense of foreboding—I’d seen this movie before—

and while my candidate had neither won nor lost, I was deeply saddened that the race was still underway. I was expecting the better angels of our country to come out by the tens of millions in a landslide of love and sanity that would sweep the incumbent out of office and usher in a resounding and overwhelming victory that would change the tenor of national discourse.

If you can call what we have been experiencing “discourse.”

That this election was even close was deeply puzzling at best, and profoundly unsettling at worst. And there I was, at the kitchen table, hours before dawn, sipping decaf coffee in deep wonderment about the state of our democratic Republic.

When I am in this state of mind, I often reach for a pencil and piece of scrap paper. With these simple tools in hand I wrote these words on the back of an envelope:

“I love my mother.”

And then these words:

“I love my father.”

I love my mother and I love my father and I am certain that they did not vote for the candidate I voted for. That they went to bed on election night quite pleased with the vote tallies, the way things looked at the time, the state-shaped shades of deep red and rosy pink coloring large expanses of the country.

When I looked at the map of the country that post-election morning—the map I thought should be a vast sea of blue—I realized that my beloved parents did their part to help keep the map red.

In the framework of binary choices, one side of our family voted blue and one side of our family voted red.

Such is Us vs. Us.

People who love each other,

* who would do anything for one another,
* who lived in the same house and
* ate the same food and
* brushed their teeth with the same toothpaste—

would grow to have *radically* divergent political viewpoints and proudly express them on their ballots.

*Passionately* different viewpoints informed and supported by different media.

And yet through role-modelling, this mother and this father showed all three of their children—in no uncertain terms—the sacred responsibility of voting, of making your voice heard within a democracy.

Democracy kept healthy through consistent and informed participation.

I love my mother.

I love my father.

And I love the lessons they taught me about being a responsible citizen.

That said, we mutually decided, years ago, to stop talking about politics. Prior to that détente, many dinners ended when someone rushed from the table in a pique of anger or frustration.

It reminds me of a time in my late teens when I was invited to a formal military dinner. My host was a high school friend who became an ROTC cadet in college. He informed me, before dinner, that his superiors informed him that there were two rules to abide by during dinner, and he wanted to make certain I knew and understood the rules:

1. Do not talk about politics
2. Do not talk about religion

“These topics,” he told me, “are where passions run deep and minds are hard to change.

Not a good combination for pleasant dinner conversation.”

I know from first-hand experience that religion and politics over dinner generally don’t help digestion. Conversations about religion and politics can be tense and knotted, righteous and emotional, judgmental and biting.

There are appropriate places to discuss and explore religion and politics, and the dinner table is not one of them. You are welcome to apply this basic military-dinner wisdom at your Thanksgiving table this pandemic holiday season!

I brought this simple rule back to my house because I love my mother and I love my father, and grew weary of half-eaten meals ending in tears, and the pot roast—once steaming and delicious—all of a sudden losing its zing and flavor.

All this to say: The tens of millions of people who voted one way and the tens of millions of people who voted another way suggest that much of our country has some version of this story: Loved ones who voted differently than you.

And please take deep and humbling comfort in this realization: They are just as dumbfounded by *your* vote as you are of theirs.

And I think “dumbfounded” is a great place to stew for a while, but not too long.

Speaking of the word “dumb,” a quick story. I was visiting my parents last fall, and they live in a ruby red Republican-controlled county. I was driving around town and decided to visit a thrift-store that happened to be flying a bright Trump flag.

“What the hell,” I thought.

I went inside, looking around for a vintage cast-iron frying pan, and then saw a small donkey statue. A donkey, of course, is the symbol of the Democratic party. Behind the statue was a hand-made sign lettered in red and blue ink: “Are you a Dumb-o-crat or just a jackass?”

I was taking a snapshot of the sign to send to my liberal friends, when the proprietor of the store tried to sell me a bright red “Make America Great Again” baseball hat. Without having yet figured out whether I was a Dumb-o-crat or a jackass or both, I replied with a bit of edge in my voice: “I wouldn’t be caught *dead* wearing that thing!”

We stared at each other and let silence hang like a dank fog that could have been cut with a bayonet, which, in fact, he sold in his store.

I’ve thought back to that brief interaction many times, wondering whether there was a more graceful way to decline his sales pitch. The quick answer is: Of course there was. A polite “No thank you” comes to mind.

As mentioned, I was visiting my parents, so when I got back to their house I told them the story of my MAGA hat adventure. My mother asked with an inviting laugh, “Don’t you want to make America great?”

We were sitting at the dining room table, of all places, the site of so many tense dinner conversations over the years. Fox News was flickering on one of the televisions somewhere in the house. “Mom, I don’t want to make America *that* kind of great.”

And we had the grace to leave it there.

Which brings us to Election Night 2020, a mere five days ago.

A member of my family is in their early twenties, who identifies as queer and who has a pre-existing condition that they will have to manage their entire life with expensive medication, called in a panic. When the electoral map was trending red and pink they called in tears, deeply freaked out that the election that they thought would be a massive blue tsunami was more like a gently lapping farm pond.

They did not mince their Election Night words, and in a voice crackling with emotion: “I don’t understand how these gun-loving racists can’t see 230,000 dead people!”

Mind you, the person saying this sentence grew up a Unitarian Universalist. They know the first principle by heart. With all due respect to the heat of the moment, when you turn a fellow human being with inherent worth and dignity into a gun-loving racist you abandon the power and beauty of your religion.

***You*** abandon the power and beauty of this religion.

This religion is yours to make real in the world—and, in fact, Unitarian Universalism can-*not* exist outside actual persons *actually* practicing the religion. And please listen again to the first words from that freaked-out call: “I don’t understand!”

To me, that is an opening for *this* profound and humbling question: “Would you *like* to understand?”

Repeat: “Would you *like* to understand?”

Would you like to catalyze our fourth principle: “The free and responsible search for truth and meaning?”

As Unitarian Universalists in 2020 we are *called* to try to understand, because at this point in our nation’s soul-life, we are living through a bitterly divided period of Us vs. Us.

One “Us” colored deep blue, one “Us” colored deep red, and the “Us-es” separated by a sharp and pointed *versus*.

Moving forward, we need to minimize the sharp “versus” and maximize the uniting “Us.”

With the 2020 election behind us, the growing edge of our religious practice is to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of *every* person—especially those who voted differently than our particular Us. Starting there is what our religious practice calls us to do.

To say it as plain as day: It is hard to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of a Dumb-o-crat or a gun-loving racist. Those are pernicious labels that belittle and de-humanize.

As stated earlier, our religious practice is profoundly challenging.

Are we prepared to help move this democracy forward and live on the growing edge of our religious faith by recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of

* Dumb-o-crats and jackasses,
* of gun-loving racists and MAGA-hat salesmen?

During this election season I stood face to face with a masked man with the letters V O T E emblazoned on his black mask.

He told me, in no uncertain terms, *inside a sanctuary,* that he was struggling with his religious practice, and did not know whether he could find the worth and dignity within another human being with whom he disagreed politically.

If I knew then what I know now, I would have gifted him a new white mask, with big red and big blue letters across the front: L O V E.

As the President-elect concluded his victory speech, he told a lovely story that whenever he left his grandparents’ house, his grandfather would say “Joey, keep the faith.” And then his grandmother would say, “No, Joey, *spread* the faith.”

As we turn the page on this historically consequential election, it is historically consequential that we UUs follow that grandmother’s deep wisdom: Spread the faith in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Amen

**SOURCES**

Warren Zevon’s song “Lawyers, Guns, and Money.”

“Trump and polarization drove record turnout. So did mail voting, which should be universal,” by Michael P. McDonald. USA Today, November 4, 2020.

https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/11/04/trump-polarization-mail-voting-drove-record-2020-turnout-column/6153959002/