

Lift Up Our Voices
November 1, 2020
Rev. Dr. Judith E. Wright

Two days from now, as we all know, is an election day that is, perhaps the most important election within our lifetimes. As both Bob S. and Don H. have just shared with us, our democracy is threatened and our UU voices are needed to defend and repair the social contract of our larger society.

The word “democracy” comes from the Greek word *Dēmokratiā*, which when separated into two parts becomes “demos” for “people,” and “kratos” for “rule.” Ideally, democracy then *is a form of government in which the people have the authority to choose their governing legislation.*¹

Voting is the main way for most of us to participate in our democracy today. The late Congressman John Lewis stated:

My dear friends: Your vote is precious, almost sacred.

*It is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have to create a more perfect union.*²

The goal of all people voting and electing their leaders was clearly one that John envisioned, as do many of us who desire for our democracy to be a true *Dēmokratiā*, where all the people have the authority to choose their governing legislation.

This is not, as we all know, a current reality in our country, but as Don just shared,

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy>

² John Lewis. Quote from 20102 speech in Charlotte, North Carolina. <https://blackalliance.org/john-lewis-quotes/#:~:text=%20Best%20John%20Lewis%20Quotes%3A%20Voting%2C%20Love%2C%20Education%2C,anyone...%204%20Quotes%20on%20Love.%20%20More%20>

voting rights are threatened and lessened across the nation today.

I learned a great deal about threats to our democracy by reading Madeline Albright's book, *Fascism, A Warning*.

Madeline Albright is the first woman to serve as Secretary of State, during President Bill Clinton from 1997-2001.

She currently is a distinguished professor at Georgetown, University.

Our UUSL book group read her book, *Fascism*, for its September meeting.

Today not just in America are democratic values threatened, but according to Madeline Albright, the threat is worldwide. She documents the rise of different regimes around the world, which she states are now undermining

“the institutions and democratic principles that have held the world together”³ throughout her life (and mine, and I suspect, many of yours)-

She shares with us some characteristics of fascism (as opposed to democracy). She says:

Fascist attitudes take hold where there are no social anchors and when the perception grows that everybody lies, steals, and cares only about him or herself. This is when the yearning is felt for a strong hand to protect against the evil “other” - whether Jew, Muslim, black, so-called red-neck, or so-called elite.⁴

We all have heard in our nation today, distressingly, such rhetoric being expressed sometimes, over and over again.

One lesson I learned from reading Madeline's book is that fascism has always been with us, in some form, within the human condition.

³ Madeline Albright with Bill Woodward. *Fascism: A Warning*. New York: Harper Perennial. 2018 xvi

⁴ Albright, xviii.

She believes there is within us a yearning, as she writes,
for someone to come along,
and take control and tell us what he or she thinks will make life better for all.
What happens, of course, with fascism is that some control the many,
and power often begets the desire for more power,
often with terrible violations of human rights,
and suppression of any opposing voices.
Madeline Albright emphasizes that fascism will always be with us
with her own dedication of her book:

To the victims of Fascism
Then and now
And to all who fight Fascism
In others
And in themselves.⁵

So, her thesis is that while at least some of us want to
be free to make our own choices,
others want to be told what to do.⁶

Albright states that we humans are of “*two minds*.”

She cites religious instruction as an example of how
we humans can be of two minds:

Many religions teach scripture by rote memorization
(a disciplined approach, with someone telling others what to memorize)
versus one’s *free search for wisdom, which begins with scripture,*
and then opens up to the full range of human experience and imaginings.
She illustrates this point further with the example of

⁵ Albright, ix

⁶ Albright, p. 241.

when rabbis answer a question with another question,

“and why do you think that is?”

(A practice I think would be good for all of us to hone).

She believes that these two ways of thinking

are a natural tension within the human condition:

- the desire for freedom versus being told what to do.

We all know that ideally within a democracy

what is needed is a strong leader who is humble enough to listen to others, and collaborate with others within a democratic framework of governance.

But what may happen, and has happened again and again in other countries, if too much power is given to one leader, fascism may take root and thrive.

Here is a chilling example that Madeline offers in her book:

In 1936 Hitler gave the following explanation for his popularity:

“I will tell you what has carried me to the position I have reached. Our political problems appear complicated. The German people could make nothing of them...

I, on the other hand, reduced them to the simplest terms. The masses realized this and followed me.⁷”

One of Madeline Albright’s conclusions is that

when we lose sight of our ideals,

it is not that democracy has failed us.

It is the failure of those charged with preserving and protecting democracy.⁸

She writes of two democratic leaders whom she admires because each did not succumb to the

⁷ Albright. P. 243.

⁸ Albright, p. 244.

temptations of power: Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela.

She offers their leaderships as examples of how democratic leadership can fight that which is threatening democracy and win, in the final hour.

Of both men she wrote:

*Lincoln and Mandela fought with monsters; neither became one.*⁹

For democracy to thrive, freedom must be defended and lies confronted.¹⁰

A clear lesson from Madeline Albright's vast work in the world is that we need to be constantly vigilant in preserving our sacred democracy.

Our children's story this morning illustrates well how easily it might be for our country to slip into a more fascist state.

The story is one where the tiger is convinced that a lie is the truth.

We all know that when something fake is said over and over again, as a truth, eventually at least some of us begin to believe that this is, indeed, true.

For example, we have heard that the science, of climate change or the pandemic, is not true, again and again,

through news reports and the media,

even though we can see the effects of climate change right now,

as well as the devastating increasing number of cases of coronavirus.

Some in our country have listened to politicians tell them,

either directly or indirectly, that whites are superior to all other races,

even when there is absolutely no basis for such a destructive untruth

that creates division and hatred and prejudice towards all those worthy of

common decency and respect,

as well as the right to participate in our democracy.

⁹ Albright, p.252.

¹⁰ Albright, p. 252.

Like the lion in our children's story
we need to tell the real truth about what is happening in our country today,
and unlock the cages that have captured people's minds unwittingly.
For, indeed, it is the truth that will set us free.

Some of you may be wondering how I, as a minister,
can preach about democracy.
Isn't there a division between politics and religion?
Yes, and no, as within our Unitarian Universalist tradition,
there are very strong theological reasons
that demand that I preach this morning or whenever the need arises,
as a moral imperative, about issues that threaten our democracy.

Among our seven UU principles, we can point to our fifth principle, for sure,
*The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process,
within our congregations and in society at large.*

as a legitimate religious basis for talking this morning
about threats to democracy.

Then we can also look at the history of our faith.
We have been, every two or four years,
part of every election, organizing
to carry our UU values into the larger society.

Our work as UUs for justice, equity and compassion in human relations
has placed us working for climate justice, for GLBTQ rights,
and other human rights
that preserve the inherent worth and dignity of all people,
across our country and world-wide.

Our current UU the Vote campaign's slogan
"vote love, not hate"
captures well who we are as UUs,
and how we work for electoral justice
as well as other forms of justice.

The twentieth century great UU theologian,
Rev. Dr. James Luther Adams also provides us as UUs
with solid theological grounding for talking about preserving our democracy.
He viewed our faith as "*a prophetic faith,
whose role is to make history and not be pulled around by it.*"¹¹
Susan Leslie, UUA Congregational Advocacy and Witness Director,
urges us to be out there in the world with our UU values.¹²

She asks the important question:
"How are we all going to live together on this planet in an equitable way?"
How do we work to close the gap between the world as it is,
and how we would like it to be?

Our UU legacy from our tradition speaks volumes about how
there is no doubt that we as UUs act when injustice and present.
Just remember with me Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo,
both UUs killed when working for voting rights
during the Civil Rights movement.

¹¹ Susan Leslie <https://www.uuthevote.org/ministers-forum-vote-love-not-hate-unitarian-universalist-voting-justice-with-susan-leslie/>

¹² <https://www.uuthevote.org/ministers-forum-vote-love-not-hate-unitarian-universalist-voting-justice-with-susan-leslie/>

And, as I preached on October 4th, ours is a story of women's suffrage
and working for the abolition of slavery,
up to years of challenging Jim Crow,
and now working to end the New Jim Crow.
Today as we face new threats to voting,
UUs are now working to try and create a new Voting Rights Act,
in honor of Representative John Lewis.

We UUs are also people who join in coalitions with other groups
working for values similar to ours –
such as The Poor People's Campaign, NAACP, UUActionNH,
and different organizations working for climate justice.

The UU the Vote's slogan of "Vote Love, not hate,"
is grounded in our Universalist heritage,
where God is a loving God.¹³

Susan Leslie states that our theology

“Isn't just about parties or particular individuals.

This is about the social compact.

As people of faith we stand with the most vulnerable,

The least of these. – What better role for religion is there?”¹⁴

Susan quotes James Luther Adams again,
in saying that part of the role of the prophetic church
is to interpret the signs of the times,

¹³¹³ <https://www.uuthevote.org/ministers-forum-vote-love-not-hate-unitarian-universalist-voting-justice-with-susan-leslie/>

¹⁴ Ibid

and to make meaning out of what is happening.

And then, to figure out what to do to overcome such oppression.

So, my companions in faith, one thing we can do is join others in the Lakes Region and state, and nationally, to broaden our networks and partnerships in the work ahead.

We know that we are much stronger together than if we try to do something alone.

There is a lot of fear surrounding us today, and I believe the opposite of fear is love.

We are the Love People; we Side with Love.

Love to counter threats to democracy some of which, Bob and Don and I have shared with you this morning.

We must move beyond whatever happens on November 3rd to continue the justice work of our faith.

After the election, many pressing issues will still be with us.

We best recognize that it is up to us –

The Dēmokratiā, to lift up our voices, and then roll up our sleeves for the challenging road ahead, to make our democracy more effective.

We best make sure our children and grandchildren are steeped in understanding

how our democracy can work and be preserved.

And we can learn to respond to those whose ideas differ from us not with intolerance,

but with listening well and then trying to find the places where we can come

together across ideological differences to make our democracy stronger.

Finally, we cannot afford to take our democracy for granted,
but to cherish it, work to strengthen it, and of course, Vote!

We need, as our UUA President Susan Frederick Gray so eloquently urges,
*“for each of us to have the courage, heart, and the faith to meet this moment
of time.”*

May it be so. Peace and Love to you.