

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

Seeking Democracy, Seeking Kindness

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&

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Seeking Democracy: If you can, keep it!

Rev. Sweetser

The story goes that when the Continental Congress finished drafting the Declaration of Independence in 1776, they asked for a vote. The Declaration passed. A person came up to Benjamin Franklin and asked, "so we will have a republic and not a monarchy?" "If you can keep it," said Franklin.

In a republic, the system of governance is a democracy. Power comes from the people. Specifically, it comes from the people who vote. In the United States, everyone legally may vote, but just about half the eligible voters vote in any given presidential election. Access to voting is access to power.

Limiting voting access was a central strategy of the Republican Party during the 2020 presidential election. Republicans believed, correctly, "GOPers" were most likely to show up and cast a real ballot on election day. In 2020 the COVID 19 pandemic restrictions prevented "at-risk" people from going to public polling places. Therefore, there were many, many requests for absentee ballots. Republicans made unsubstantiated claims that absentee voting is subject to voter fraud.

At the core of our Republic are these three democratic convictions: that power comes from the people. That, people, exert their power by voting. That, attacks on voting, and access to voting are attacks on democracy. No wonder Franklin had his doubts!

Ultimately 56 people signed the Declaration of Independence. They were all members of the Second Continental Congress that met from 1776 until 1781. About a third of them were either Unitarian or Universalist. Sociologist David Holmes sorts through the carefully constructed versions of the founders' personal beliefs and argues against the Religious Right's insistence that the Founding Fathers were conventional Christians.

Holmes turns to Franklin and the first five presidents, inspecting their church attendance, observing sacraments, and the terms they used to refer to the deity and religion. All six seem more deistic than orthodox; they are against the Trinity and other supernatural concepts.

Deism refers to natural religion or the idea that religiosity is born into each of us. Natural religiosity results from our kinship with humanity. We know we are like other people. We want

them to like us, which as the late UU Minister A. Powell Davies put it, “being around others tempts us to be kind, to find our kinship with them. Kindness is what our faith and our republic require to thrive. Linguistically the root meaning of kind is kin. Religiously it means the great kinship, the great family of loving hope.”

In the summer of 1956 I was treated to a tour of Unitarian Universalist Washington DC. My mother organized this to her and its focus was All Souls Church Unitarian where A. P. Davies was the senior minister. My mother and Davies had worked together in the anti-nuclear movement for a decade or more.

A high point of that visit was when Mr. Davies took us to the Capitol. there we met several Unitarian Universalist Representatives. Everyone seemed to know A. P Davies!

It impressed me at the time and still does today. This Banner start God how long with people who are great with him and with people who did not agree with them. he was their advisor, minister, and friend. There is a lot of power and kindness—a lot of power in the kinship of humanity.

As we walked down the corridor, I noticed a small group had identified Mr. Davies. The scrim made a quick U-turn, and started heading down the hall away from us. “Who is that, and why are they running away?” I asked.

“Oh, it's our Quaker Vice President, Richard Nixon,” said Davies, “He finds me tiresome. You see,” Davies continued, “I have been against Communism my whole life, but I have [also] criticized the untruths and injustices of the investigating committees . . . I am what is called a controversial person: that is . . . one who does not keep quiet in the presence of evil.” Just then, he wasn’t about to be quiet.

“Oh, Dick, Dick - come back here. Meet your nuclear nemesis from Massachusetts, Barbara Sweetser!” What a wonderfully awkward confab it was. As we walked away, Davies observed, “Successful people keep kindness top of mind. Dick’s going to have a hard road.”

Our optimistic religion calls upon each of us to believe in kindness, kinship, and hope.

Seeking Kindness

Rev. Lloyd

The world turns in strange ways . . . our view, my view of this country and my place/your place in it, has looked very different the past 4 ½ years. In April 2016, when I was in the process of being called by you to be your minister, I spoke then, to you about developing a spiritual discipline of kindness. For today’s reflection, I went back to those words to study what I had

said then, prior to entering an era of such great divisiveness. As it turns out, the background for my ministry with you has largely been an era of divisiveness that few of us understood at the beginning, and by which I think most of were repelled.

PAUSE

Many of us are happy with the election results, but, surely we cannot help but notice that we are still a divided nation. The popular vote is still pretty close. I think some us had hoped for a landslide victory where a super majority of citizens, rose up . . .

- to say, ‘enough’!
- to reclaim the values of civility, decency and respect for one another!
- to reclaim the inherent foundation of kindness upon which our democracy is built!
- to support a democracy that cries for listening to one another, for compassion and for restorative justice!

No, it isn’t what I would call a landslide victory, and regardless of the final victor, we are left divided, not quite knowing how to reach out to one another to heal the divide . . . not quite knowing how to listen to one another again. To me, being able to listen to each other would make America great again.

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The Dalai Lama says, “Love and kindness are the very basis of society. [When] we lose [them], society [faces] tremendous difficulties; the survival of humanity [is] endangered . . . [We] need spiritual development so that inner peace and social harmony can be experienced. Without inner peace, without inner calm, it is difficult to have lasting peace [with others].”^{1 2}

PAUSE

¹ The Dalai Lama. Kindness, Clarity, and Insight. <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/16195> November 7, 2020 “Kindness is the starting point . . . for so many . . . positive qualities, such as honesty, forgiveness, patience, and generosity.” He says, we are dependent on others’ kindness at the beginning and end of our lives. In between the end points of our life, we are the only ones left to offer kindness.”

² The Dalai Lama. Kindness, Clarity, and Insight. <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/16195> November 7, 2020. “[We] who have certain beliefs have a duty and responsibility to control our own bad thoughts. This [would be] real disarmament, our own arms control. With inner peace and full control of [our] bad thoughts, external control is not particularly significant. Without inner control, no matter what steps are taken, external efforts will not make much difference. Therefore, under the present [political] circumstances, we in the religious community have a special responsibility to all humanity – a universal responsibility.”

That said, I know that it can feel risky to practice kindness in this world. That feeling of risk comes with the vulnerability you accept when you offer your gift of generosity, (the gift of yourself); when you offer your willingness to trust another person, trusting that they will not break or abuse your kindness. It is a risky business, this practice of being kind to another person because we do not know exactly what they will do with our gift. The act of practicing the spiritual discipline of kindness is a pre-emptive *leaping* of our faith in humankind, without a net.

We ask for nothing in return, except perhaps for acceptance and compassion for the imperfect human beings that we are.

To really practice kindness with others requires some spiritual muscle. It requires that we develop the spiritual discipline of practicing kindness, starting with ourselves before we move on to others.

The current President of our Unitarian Universalist Association is The Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray. She has had a long-time spiritual discipline of trying to practice kindness. There are three parts.

(Adapted from Susan Frederick-Gray)

- **First Principle – Name or share a kindness received, each day.**

Doing so, offers us the opportunity to develop the ability to recognize kindness when it happens! Naming acts of kindness is a first step toward creating health.

- **Second Principle – Engage in a Daily Kindness Meditation,** offering a blessing of hope, love, kindness, wellness and peace for yourself and for others:

- Begin with yourself – reflect on what kindness you can extend to yourself . . .
- Reflect on a close friend, offer them love and hope in your meditation . . .
- Reflect on someone you don't know well. Offer them wellness and peace in your meditation . . .
- Reflect on someone with whom you have difficulty. Offer them hope, love, kindness, peace and wellness . . .
- Offer a blessing of love and kindness to all living things.

- **Third Principle – reflect on how this practice affects you and your relationships.**

PAUSE

None of this is easy. All of it requires a commitment of your soul, and of your time, to realize the transformation you seek.

PAUSE

In going over the principles I just outlined it reminds me a little bit of when you see a list of job requirements for the first time. You check them off. OK – I can do that and that and that. Feeling a little smug, you run straight into the one that gives you pause, that makes you wonder can I really do this?

PAUSE

Can you think of someone with whom it would be difficult to offer them hope, love, . . . kindness?

PAUSE

Beloved, the division sown in this country will not evaporate with the election results. It has taken tenacious root. Much like Covid-19, I am not convinced it can be entirely eradicated. But, it will need to be fought and quarantined if our democracy is to survive. And, what is *so very clear* to me is that while effective leadership can help chart the way, and suggest new norms, *we*, the citizens of this country, and *we*, the members of all faith and secular organizations that promote listening to one another, as well as the practice of compassion and justice, *we*, will need to be the human face, the human hand, *the human force*, that embodies acts of kindness to others. *We* are the only ones that can turn the evil that so effectively divides us now toward healing and compassion for one another.

So how do we do this? As I said before we need a form of kindness that has some spiritual muscle.

I offer you a short story written by Susan Frederick-Gray.

Some days, [my spiritual practice of kindness] is really powerful and meaningful, [other days not so much – that’s normal]. [But, she confesses it has had a positive effect on her life.] [She says,] “there is this someone who [is not always so easy to communicate with] . . . I just think we don’t always understand each other very well; there seem to be barriers in our communication . . . Anyway, for several days while doing [my] loving kindness meditation, [I’d] been visualizing this person. Then a week [later], I ran into her. I didn’t expect to see her . . . but there she was[!] and it was really striking because when I saw her, I immediately

felt happy to see her, even drawn to her. She looked different to me – warmer, brighter, friendlier and I immediately wanted to talk with her. Now this was not my usual experience! I usually felt guarded, so this was a big change, and it was so sudden and happened within moments. In [those] few seconds of seeing her and talking to her, I [realized . . .] ‘wow, this is different.’

I want to be clear. I don’t think [my] meditation practice changed her. I was the one changed. My guardedness came down. I was more open and kind and trusting. [In my kindness practice] [I’d kept] visualizing her surrounded by peace and kindness [and that was what I saw] when I . . . ran into her . . . [Amazingly,] I already feel [different] . . . better, about our relationship.³

PAUSE

And, so I encourage you to really work at incorporating a spiritual discipline of kindness into your life. Not because someone else needs a favor, though they might. Not because they will accept your gift with gratitude, because they might not. Not because it’s the right thing to do, though it is. Do it because your spirit longs to be whole, longs to be released from the petty distractions and emotions of our world, longs to soar to a place where it offers its courage to the world, without fear of consequence. Do it because, our country, our towns, our neighbors, our families and loved ones are hurting from the divisiveness that’s been sown. Do it because no one leader, by themselves, however well-intentioned, can turn their people toward decency, civility, and kindness. They always need our help.

Do it, beloved, because, in truth, we are the only ones who can really turn this nation back to one that is grounded on the democratic principles of listening to each other, offering compassion, and delivering justice.

Do it because the quality of our lives and our children’s lives, depend on us.

May it be so.

³ Susan Frederick Gray, “Loving Kindness as a Spiritual Discipline”, 2/23/14, <http://www.phoenixuu.org/files/02.23.14%20Loving%20Kindness%20as%20Spiritual%20Practice.pdf> November 7, 2020.