

Sermon: The Formation of Noble Leadership, Past, Present and Future

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March 16, 2025

If you are new to Unitarian Universalism, you may not know that this faith is firmly grounded in the founding principles of this country, and before that, in the free religious principles of a small country in Europe, Transylvania. It was there, in 1568, that our first and only Unitarian King, King Sigismund, created the Edict of Torda. That edict mandated the practice of religious tolerance. And, I quote, “In every place the preachers shall preach . . . according to [their] understanding . . . it is not permitted that anyone should [be imprisoned for their beliefs] ... ”

When this country was founded, (some 200 years later), many were leaders in search of freedom from religious persecution. My colleague Craig Scott says, “The founders [of this country] were [an extraordinary] group – their religious affiliations ran the gamut, [their views were liberal, even radical for their time]. Among the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, there were Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Quakers, Unitarians, Roman Catholics, and Universalists.” Among those who signed were: John Adams, a Unitarian; Robert Treat Paine, who became a Unitarian; and, Benjamin Rush, a Presbyterian who attended a Universalist Church.

Three of our first six Presidents either were, or were known to be, Unitarian: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and, John Quincy Adams. Other national leaders include Presidents Millard Fillmore and William Howard Taft. Taft is the only person ever to have held both the office of President, and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. This faith produces leaders.

Not surprisingly, our Unitarian Universalist Principles reflect this heritage.

They influence the vision that this the congregation has for itself, that is:

(SUUS VISION STATEMENT, September 2016)

Guided by love, [this] congregation [will]

- [nourish] spiritual growth
- [work] for justice and
- [promote] peace

Democracy and the principle of fairness that is embedded within it, matters. It matters deeply to us. It is part of who we are, it is part of our identity. Without it, there is no “us”. That’s why exercising our right to voice disagreement, protest civilly and to vote . . . is . . . especially important.

Those values to which this denomination and this congregation aspire also spur us on to find noble leadership in this congregation and in our country. Leaders who are compassionate, generous, fair-minded and moral. Noble leadership. Noble, meaning “having or showing fine personal qualities or high moral principles and ideals; and, the promotion of human rights [as] a noble aspiration.” Synonyms for the word noble include: righteous, virtuous, good, honorable, up right, decent, worthy, ethical, reputable, magnanimous, unselfish, generous.

That may be what we want in leadership (I hope it is), but sadly many of us are feeling betrayed, as though we have entered an alternate reality where our values have been abandoned. What trust we once felt in our national leadership has suffered, yet we search every nook and cranny for a glimmer that trust can still be found, and that we may yet find leaders deserving of our trust. Leaders who will rescue the democratic principles and rule of law upon which this country is founded.

Decades ago I came across a book called, “The Five Temptations of a CEO, A Leadership Fable, by Patrick Lencioni. Written as a fable, a CEO goes through a series of encounters, wherein he learns about the 5 Temptations, and how he can become a better leader.

1. The first temptation is when a leader thinks they must be (or appear to be) perfect. They cannot admit their own quirks and growing edges. When a leader doesn’t admit their imperfection and they can’t admit that they are sometimes wrong; they establish a culture that suggests to others that they can’t make mistakes either. Without mistakes, the local or national organization gets stuck, and people then refuse to take risks. A successful leader creates an atmosphere of trust, wherein our humanity and differences are not only permitted but warmly embraced. Thus, a culture of trust can be established that becomes the ground from which a vision may be realized. Here, at SUUS, our covenant helps us all establish trust in order that we may accomplish our vision.

2. The second temptation is when a leader fails to appreciate constructive disagreement in their circle of leaders. When no one expresses their opinions or concerns and when everyone just follows along, a leader and their circle deny themselves the rich diversity of information they need, to help them make the best decisions and thereby achieve their vision. Instead of squashing disagreement, leaders should cultivate constructive disagreement. Another way of expressing it, often said in this congregation is: “there is greater wisdom in the whole.” It is important that our leaders embrace the differences found among our circles and at large.

3. The third temptation is when a leader has the paralyzing habit of seeking certainty over instinct. Some of us never want to make a mistake, and in making decisions we always want to be right. We don’t want to open ourselves to criticism by others, or to put it plainly we don’t want to be wrong. Good leadership requires an instinct for the next steps of the vision. Instinct requires taking a leap of

faith that you can't always be certain of, by facts and figures. Having a clear instinct of what will work is more important than having all the facts and analyses to prove it will work. Moving forward, even when uncertain, is more important than being stuck where you are and have always been. Successful leaders must embrace risk.

4. The fourth temptation is when a leader avoids accountability. Many leaders have a natural desire to be liked and to be popular amongst the people they lead. But, for the sake of the organization (or government), if it is to move forward, if it is to thrive, if it is to achieve its vision, leaders need to be willing to put the health of the organization (or government) first, and hold themselves accountable to its vision and people.

5. The 5th temptation that a leader may succumb to is falling in love with the status that leadership brings. An example that comes to mind are the balances of power written into our Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the office of the Presidency. The founders sought to differentiate the role of "King" from that of "President". We were not and are not now looking for a King or Queen ordained by G*d (or anyone else) to rule us. We are looking for noble leadership who will put the health of our democracy over their own personal agenda. We are looking for leadership that seeks to serve the fundamental vision and principles of this country. We are looking for leadership who see themselves as public servants to the people. Falling in love with your status is a sure way for a leader to fail the people.

There is a distinction between someone who wants the glory of victory and title for him or herself, and those willing to practice self-sacrifice in order to build a better world they may never see, and for which they may never be honored.

Until now, I have spoken about those attributes that I think we want in a leader now. I haven't spoken about future leadership: that is our youth and children, to which we can and must model our values in our time and in theirs. Who, if not us, will inspire them to act on our principles of fairness, compassion and justice. If we assume there is nothing we can do, in our own small way, how will the children and youth learn acts of resistance for their day? How will they protect their communities when the next tyrant appears to "save" our nation?

We have an obligation to each other and our communities (and country) to inspire noble leadership for these times and long into the future. We must teach them right from wrong and the many ways to resist, in order that they will know how to resist injustice in their time and communities.

I offer you these familiar words from Pastor Martin Niemöller

First they came for the Communists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a Communist

Then they came for the Socialists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me

In small and larger ways, let us keep working on cultivating and electing noble leadership. Let us teach others and the next generation on how to provide trustworthy leadership, leaders who seek to serve . . . rather than to be served.

May it be so.