

Fit Democracy

A sermon by Rev. Jim McKinley, November 5, 2006

Opening Words; “November” by Rev. Kendra Ford

Responsive Reading No. 585 (in Singing the Living Tradition): “Councils” by Marge Piercy (Have right and left sides of the congregation alternate in reading. Finish with last two couplets from Abraham Lincoln in No. 586 on the same page.)

Tuesday is Election Day. It is the last day to vote in these midterm elections. This is our annual or biannual opportunity to exercise our right to vote. Casting our ballot has become our central democratic act. PBS television ends a public announcement spot by saying “make your mark on history: Vote.” I know that just about everyone here has voted (show of hands) or will vote. Members are providing rides to the polls and have been working for months to increase voter turnout. At the same time that we are doing all that work, many of us cast our vote and wonder whether it will make a difference. Still, it is what we can do and therefore it is what we must do.

Last Friday, a colleague from the Washington, DC area shared the story of an 80 something year old member of his congregation who had a serious stroke during the week. He was partially paralyzed and in intensive care in the hospital. Guess what he was most concerned about above all his other personal fears and lost powers, crises and anxieties? Yep, you got it. He wanted to be sure that they could find a way for him to vote.

That is an inspirational story. It shows how important getting to vote is to us. I sure hope on Wednesday morning that he feels like his vote counted.

Writer and speaker Howard Zinn, however does not use language of inspiration when he talks about voting. He refers to our monochromatic focus on the right to vote as a “puny” view of democracy. He says it is very puny to see the supreme act of democracy as going to the polls every 2-4 years to vote. After a short pause he adds – to vote for one of two candidates, neither of which we like very much. He sees it as a paradox of America’s democracy that we watch what elected officials do, much like one would watch royalty. Most of us are not active participants in the democratic process, he says. We are not really active in deciding policy. We hang back and wait and see what is being done to us and for us. Zinn characterizes our actions with the apt summary: we turn on the TV, watch what elected officials do and then gossip about them. It is a paradox of American life, Zinn says, that we see ourselves as passive observers, recipients of whatever the powers that be want to do.

As much as I may want to react to those words, they certainly come across with more than grains of truth. In his short talk, Zinn proposes a challenge for change that comes from Thoreau: Don’t just vote at the ballot box with your hands. Vote with your feet, with your whole body. Vote he is saying with what you do and who you are.

So how might we do that? How might we truly exercise our right to vote? How might we build it up? Make it fit? Keep it strong, perhaps even make it formidable?

We start with where we live, with who we are. We bring what seems outside our active participation and control into how we spend our time and how we approach our

communal interactions. We put ourselves in training so that democracy is not just a vote we cast once a year. Democracy is a practice and exercise we do everyday.

What better place to start than right here, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hendersonville. As a congregation we are one of the social institutions that James Luther Adams says is necessary for America to work. We are one of the voluntary associations that gives form and practice to democratic process in the society. Without such associations how would democratic conversations develop in our disassociated modern life? Where would they be held? In our Principles and purposes we covenant to affirm and promote the use of the democratic process in congregational life and in society at large. We are the gym for fit democracy. (I started to say health club but hesitated at using the word club.)

This democracy I am saying we should practice is not just a word for how we run our organization or a description of the outward structures and laws and rules of government. It is an inward discipline of relationship that comes out of our world view. It comes directly out of the understandings of our faith.

Krista Tippett hosts a radio show called Speaking of Faith and last week her guest was philosopher, Jacob Needleman. His conclusions resonate with who we are and how I have come to understand democracy as something we do. The essence of Needleman's approach to democracy was summarized in the opening remarks. Ms. Tippett: "It's election season, and we'll explore the original meaning behind the U.S. ideal of democracy with philosopher Jacob Needleman. He studied the religious imagination of American founders. In the beginning of the republic, he learned, democracy was as much an inward discipline as a form of government. The pursuit of happiness was linked with conscience. Rights went hand in hand with duties." Mr. Needleman: "...the freedom of speech, what is the duty associated with it? Well, if you ponder that a little bit, you'll come to the conclusion very clearly that the right of free speech implies the duty of allowing others to speak. That means I don't have to agree with you, but I have to let your thought into my mind in order to have a real democratic exchange between us."

When I said in October that I had faith in democracy, The democracy I had in mind is more this inward discipline. It is the inclusive circle of voices and experiences shared in conversation with open minds seeking good answers with good intent. Think back to Marge Piercy's "Council" in our opening reading. There is not one good answer to be found from god, 'there are good answers to be found together. As someone said "out of good thought comes right action." Bill Moyers talks about democracy as conversation. It is the conversation of different voices brought together. The inherent worth and dignity of everyone. It is also the open conversation that actually taps into the spiritual principles that are the underlying conscience of open democracy. It may even reflect the Biblical understanding that wherever two or three or gathered there is god. What we are doing arises out of a "spiritual vision of community" and "a deeper meaning of human equality." (Needleman's words)

When we talk about expanding our circle of compassion, we could also talk about a democracy of compassion. Opening to the voices and experiences of suffering and joy, opening to what it means to live fully in the world.

Of course we can't talk about democracy without mentioning the unalienable rights in the Declaration of Independence: "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Needleman points out that a better interpretation of the word “happiness’ from late 18th century would be “well-being.” I like that a lot. “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of well being.” “It means being what you are supposed to be as a human being.” It embraces the central religious messages of love and caring for others. Take a moment to look around at your fellow workout partners.

I remember the moment when I first saw my democratic rights and duties in a different light of less the outward struggle alone and more the inward discipline that both spoke to and acted for the pursuit of well-being. I remember when I was first able to open and relax into the process, when I first realized that my job was to put my voice into the process, in to the conversation. It was my job to follow the conversation through, it was not my job to push one view through to the decision.

Some of you have heard me tell before that Donna and I were once members of the Miccosukee Land Coop, an intentional community of over 100 homes near Tallahassee, Florida. We had a town Council with representatives from neighborhood groups. As the new member in our neighborhood, I got asked as new members do in most organizations , to take my turn as our neighborhood Representative to the town council. My friend, Bill, who had lived there for a long time took me aside and offered the following advice which has transformed my approach to meetings and governance, community and democracy. He said Jim, we expect you to represent our voice in the conversation and to participate with your own insights. It is not your job to be sure that a particular view wins. If you participate and trust the process, good things will happen and you will enjoy your time on the council. If you see only one outcome as acceptable or good, it will make you crazy.” I didn’t know then that “the whole idea that you have to listen to each other, that you have to come to a harmonious reconciliation,” reflected underlying spiritual understandings. I just knew we were trying to discover and live out the common good and that we all had to live together.

Here in this intentional community, we exercise our right to vote, we strengthen democracy :

By participating in the conversations. Our voice, your voice counts. This is not really addressed to those of us who speak out easily and maybe too often, but to those who hang back. Try to get in to the game. You exercise democracy more when you participate in the group, not when you save your comments for the friend in the parking lot.

We strengthen democracy: by listening. Not just with an ear to what we will say next, but by recognizing our duty to free speech is not just to speak but to allow others to speak , and to speak in the presence of a listening mind that is trying to be open to their thoughts. Compassion is caring with.

We strengthen democracy: By thinking. By doing our work to think beyond categories and sound bites. We then participate in the democracy of the reflective mind and the larger reflective mind of community. We do our part in finding the good answers. “Out of good thought comes right action.” Revelation is ongoing.

Aside; I think we may be at risk of becoming a culture of anger rather than of thinking. When you are really thinking and participating in a discussion remember how many times you have to explain that you are with the person and not against them. To

disagree or think differently in the moment doesn't mean that I am against you. It may only mean I am thinking from and with your thoughts on the way to new insight.

Every meeting in this congregation can be viewed as an exercise class of our fitness center for democracy. It matters how we participate, how we listen, think, and work together. Here, contrary to Zinn's description of our behavior, the TV is off, we are the participating people and we are not just talking about what our leaders are doing to us. We are practicing fit democracy.

We strengthen democracy by creating the outward structure that supports these inward practices. We can create outward structure that promotes well-being. It becomes a shared understanding of behavior larger than ourselves. The structure becomes the idea within which we pursue well being. It becomes the place within which we are being what we are supposed to be as human beings. This involves safety, understanding and agreement. This year we will be developing just such outward structure to help give form to our inward discipline, it is called a congregational covenant of right relations. How we agree to be together for the greater good of this community.

Such a covenant recognizes our duties and reflects what Jacob Needleman said about Thomas Jefferson. "What Jefferson brought," to what the democratic process is supposed to be he says, was something "we need to see in the light of very ancient spiritual traditions about what it means – what human beings owe each other in terms of how they relate to each other's ideas, views, and opinions. He understood the process of coming to a consensus, coming to a communal understanding, of listening to the other, of relationship of one human being and one group and one party to another." We will be incorporating this wisdom and doing all of these things as we develop a congregational covenant.

A covenant is simply a mutual agreement of behavior. In this gym for fit democracy, the small groups that we call Covenant groups can be thought of as the Nia classes, our water aerobics. They function very similarly to the Councils we talked about earlier. Every one shares from their experience and reflection. Everyone gets to speak without response. Everyone must listen. [more here]. Members find new insights. Almost everyone enjoys a sense of well-being.

If I had more time I would talk about how we have to make time for the practice of fit democracy. It is time that I am not sure we have.

If we had time we would open to interchange in this service. We would create new insights.

And if we had time I would suggest from my readings that the one way to make the most difference in the outward structure of the democracy of our United States government is to work for public campaign financing. In the states where that has been passed the quality of the conversation has changed. Money is no longer the loudest voice, drowning out or cowering all others.

Tomorrow or Tuesday we will finish our voting. We will do our part participating in the outward structure that is our form of government. They call the contests races. They feel like races we are running. And whatever the results, we will then return to our exercise routine, getting stronger, more fit, finding new ways to "vote" more often. (figuratively that is).

I close with a quote from Walt Whitman's essay Democratic Vistas which was written following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Needleman suggests that these thoughts resonate now as well.

“I say the mission of government, henceforth in civilized lands, is not repression alone and not authority alone, not even law, nor the rule of the best men, but higher than the highest arbitrary rule, to train communities through all their grades beginning with individuals and ending there again to rule themselves. To be a voter with the rest is not so much. And this, like every institute, will have its imperfections. But to become an enfranchised man and now, impediments removed, to stand and start without humiliation and equal with the rest, to commence the grand experiment whose end may be the forming of a full-grown man or woman – that is something.”

That is well-being. I'll vote for that.

I hope your hopes are realized and if they are not that you find support and some comfort starting up your routine again with the nudge and encouragement of your fellow exercise partners.

Benediction: No. 698. “Take courage friends....” Wayne B. Arnason