The Democratic Process

The fifth principle of Unitarian Universalism states: “We affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” I wanted to discuss this principle with you today. But no matter what I tried, I couldn’t come up with a “sermon” on the subject. Because - there really isn’t much you don’t already know about democracy, is there? We all know that Democracy describes a form of government, with fundamental features like competitive elections, freedom of speech (especially in political affairs), freedom of the press, and some degree of rule of law.

We are also well informed about details like Majority rule, separation of powers, political pluralism, equality before the law, the right to petition elected officials for redress of grievances, due process, civil liberties, human rights, and most other elements of civil society outside the government.

We are quite sure that we actually live in a democracy; although H.L. Mencken once said that “Democracy is only a dream: it should be put in the same category as Arcadia, Santa Claus, and Heaven.”

Nevertheless, we see ourselves as parents who are being as democratic as possible in their relationship with their kids; we are members of a congregation that is run by using the principles of democracy, and we have elected a government in our country under a democratic system.

So – I really can’t preach to you about democracy, you already know it all! And, I’m no Abraham Lincoln, who went to Gettysburg without having commissioned a poll to find out what would sell in Gettysburg. There were no people with percentages for him, cautioning him about this group or that group or what they found in exit polls a year earlier. I do not have the courage of Lincoln!

Today, I will rely on the help of smart people from around the world, and the smart people here in this room. So - I won’t preach, but I will try to illustrate some of my opinions about the democratic process with quotes and examples that deal with some of the problems we all have with it.

I want to focus on three terms that seem to me to be important for the success of the democratic process: presence – knowledge and trust. Without presence, knowledge and trust a democracy can’t work. I will be using three different levels of politics to illustrate what I mean: the family, the smallest cell of a state; the average UU-congregation, and the United States government.

Let’s start with the term “presence.” May I ask those of you who have a quote printed in blue to please get up and read it to us:
The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment. -Robert M. Hutchins

So long as the people do not care to exercise their freedom, those who wish to tyrannize will do so; for tyrants are active and ardent, and will devote themselves in the name of any number of gods, religious and otherwise, to put shackles upon sleeping men. -Voltaire

If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost. -Aristotle

Voting is one of the few things where boycotting in protest clearly makes the problem worse rather than better. -Jane Auer

The citizen can bring our political and governmental institutions back to life, make them responsive and accountable, and keep them honest. No one else can. -John Gardner

The most effective way to restrict democracy is to transfer decision-making from the public arena to unaccountable institutions: kings and princes, priestly castes, military juntas, party dictatorships, or modern corporations. -Noam Chomsky

All those smart people are telling us that it is vital to be an active part of the government, otherwise it is impossible to have a functioning democracy.

Let’s look at the family level, and use the example from the children’s: if a parent isn't available to offer and discuss different options, like for example a trip to the Zoo or a visit to a ballgame, then there is no chance for all to make a democratic decision based on the individual’s preferences.

In our congregations, if you don’t show up for a Congregational Meeting, often a decision can’t be made because of lack of a quorum; or the decision that is made does not really represent the majority opinion.

By the way, does anyone in here – except for board members – know what the quorum is for a Congregational Meeting? - Yep, it’s 30% of all members. Now if you do the math, we need 30 out of our 100 members here today to even be able to vote on anything. For many motions to carry, we need a simple majority, that means 16 out of those 30. So in theory, 16 people can make important decisions for the whole congregation. Even when you look at the most important decisions, where a 2/3 majority is needed, in this congregation 20%, in other words one fifth of all the members, can decide the outcome.

Is it any wonder that so often people are disgruntled because they feel that their opinions are not valued?
Well, in my not so humble opinion, you don’t have the right to complain if you don’t show up! And I don’t mean in person – there are proxies and absentee ballots so that literally everyone can put in their 5 cents worth.

And of course the same is true on the level of the government of our country. As long as the percentage of people who vote in elections doesn’t go up dramatically, the results will always be skewed. The original system with the Electoral College was set up at a time when people were more enthusiastic about the democratic process. For example, the voter turnout rate in 1860, when anti-slavery candidate Abraham Lincoln won the election, was the second-highest on record with 81.2 percent, second only to 1876, with 81.8 percent.

Let me give you some statistics about voter participation world-wide. Between 1960-1995, voter turn-out in Australia was an average of 95%; in Germany it was 86%, in the Netherlands: 83%; in Canada, France and the UK: 76%. The U.S. is the third lowest on this list with 56%; only Switzerland with 54% and Poland with 51% were lower. Only 70% of all eligible voters are registered. But the good news is, that according to an article in the "American Political Science Review, “...voter turnout should be seen as habitual behavior that can be learned or unlearned, especially among young adults.” (Plutzer, E. "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood." 96, no. 1 (2002): 41–56.)

Now, let’s talk about knowledge. Unfortunately, it ties in directly with the voter turn-out issue. Statistically, the parts of the population with the lowest representation at elections are the poor and un-educated. There is much work to be done to change this situation; and we UU’s can help a lot with the efforts to educate people about the importance of voting. But let’s listen to the voices of other smart people. If you have a quote printed in red, please get up now and share it with us:

*Democracy is a device that ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve.*  
-George Bernard Shaw

*As democracy is perfected, the office represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their hearts desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.*  
-H. L. Mencken (The Baltimore Evening Sun, July 26, 1920)

*Democracy encourages the majority to decide things about which the majority is ignorant.* -John Simon

*In true democracy every man and women is taught to think for himself or herself.*  
-Mohandas K. Gandhi
I know of no safe repository of the ultimate power of society but people. And if we think them not enlightened enough, the remedy is not to take the power from them, but to inform them by education. -Thomas Jefferson

Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government. -Thomas Jefferson

As you heard me say in the children’s story – democracy has a lot to do with decision making. We have to make decisions all the time. And it’s absolutely essential that we know as much as possible about the different options. That’s why the democratic process is not very prevalent in our families. As a rule, parents know more than their children – although kids will seriously doubt that fact for most of their teenage years – so most important decisions have to be made in a more authoritarian manner.

But even in a family with younger children, this aspect of the democratic process can be encouraged by giving children tasks of research – for example which movie to see based on reviews or censoring; or what cereal to buy, based on the nutritional information on the label. Knowledge helps the members of any group to live in a democratic system.

In our congregational life, the issue of knowledge is the main reason for having committees. Of course, the fact that we need to spread the workload is important, too; but much more significant is the need for people who know more about certain aspects of governance than others.

The best example is probably the finance committee, whose members usually are skilled money people; or the building and grounds people who have more than average skills when it comes to landscaping or repairs. Even if committee members to not have more knowledge or experience at the outset, in the course of their work they will strive to increase it. Let me give you a few examples:

- the worship committee is planning the service for a whole year. They need to know where to find guest speakers for those Sundays when the Minister is off. They might call other churches in the area, they can contact the local seminaries, they can join one of the many list-serves the UUA offers to inform themselves of other options for lay-led services.

- the Welcoming Congregation Committee needs to know resources for glbt folks, they also need to know how the political situation is in the township, the district, the state, etc, so that they can alert the congregation when action is needed. The members of this committee will be especially alert when reading the newspaper; they will be part of a network of similar organizations in the area; and they will probably join Interweave, the UUA umbrella organization.

- the music committee needs to know the hymns in our hymnal really well, they need to be able to judge the “singability” of certain hymns when the minister makes suggestions; they need to know who in the congregation has special talents to perform occasionally. They find choir anthems for Sunday mornings, and they, too, can get help from the UUA, where there is a large UU-musicians network.
- the CRE committee needs to know where to find resources for our children’s religious education, they need to know how to teach, how to organize field trips, etc.
- the aesthetics committee needs to know what colors to paint the walls, what kind of carpet and what kind of chairs to buy. They will contact different contractors, they will look at many different paint samples, they will compare prices, etc.

As a rule, to have a committee increases the knowledge of the congregation. And with increased knowledge it is easier to make good decisions for the whole body.

A congregation that has chosen its committee members wisely, and has empowered them to do their job, can then focus on their spiritual life, their relationships with each other and the world at large.

Allow me to combine the first two issues for a moment - presence and knowledge: If you want the democratic process to work, those individuals who have made the commitment to serve as a leader, need to "show up." Only when all members of a team share the workload, the organization can strive. But the opposite is also a problem: an organization will start feeling a lot of strain when it’s always the same people who are present in committees or in other leadership positions.

The equivalent to the committees in our congregations are probably the government agencies. Except that they get paid . . . Congregations often have a problem with their committees, and U.S. citizens often have problems with one or the other government agency. And not only U.S. citizens, according to a story that Virginia wants to share with us . . .

As you can see, even the best system and the most well-intentioned organization can go overboard in its job. But there are other issues, too. And that brings me to my third issue: trust. But let’s have our quotes again before I go on. If you have a quote printed in green, please get up and share it with us.

Of all forms of government and society, those of free men and women are in many respects the most brittle. They give the fullest freedom for activities of private persons and groups who often identify their own interests, essentially selfish, with the general welfare. -Dorothy Thompson

Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time. -E. B. White

We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people.
- John F. Kennedy
We have to be able to trust our leaders to a large extent. If we could not, for example, trust that our children’s RE teachers are doing a good job, we’d have to go and check on them all the time; or we’d just have to do it ourselves. If we didn’t trust our music committee to pick the right hymns for next week, we’d have to go through the hymnal ourselves every week, and then e-mail our suggestions to the music director. Or vote on them, like we did today!

When you elect your board members, you tell them with your vote that you trust them enough to run the day-to-day business of your congregation. Otherwise you’d have to be at every board meeting, hoping that your input is heard. Or the congregation would have to have a congregational meeting for every little detail, like for example how much to pay the cleaning person, or to establish a new task force.

It’s just like you vote for your senators and representatives, sending them to the State House or to Washington so that they can run the country while you get on with your life. And as a rule, you will not worry too much about the many bills that they vote on; the debates that they have and the decision they make.

Okay, let’s see: if you are present in the voting booth or at a congregational meeting; if you have informed yourself – or have been informed through your committee members or political representatives whom you trust so that you can make the right decisions, then everything should be fine and dandy, right?

Well, yeah – but often it isn’t. In the presidential election, you have the choice between to or three candidates – only one of them can win, the other (or others) will lose.

When you vote for the hymns you want to sing, and the majority likes another hymn better than your favorite – you lose. That’s the problem with the democratic process. Sometimes you do everything right, and you still don’t get things your way!

For children, this is very frustrating, They often are very poor losers, because they cannot understand the unfairness of it all. But adults have problems, too. At least sometimes. Listen to what the liberal British politician Frank Owen once said – I guess “tongue in cheek: “In 1929 the wise, far-seeing electors of my native Hereford sent me to Westminster and, two years later, the lousy bastards kicked me out.”

But back to winning and losing: The only way to make the democratic process work without anyone losing would be by consensus. And to my knowledge there is only one small group of people who govern themselves successfully in that way, namely the Society of Friends (a.k.a.) the Quakers. I’m afraid we UU’s are too contentious to attempt decision making by consensus . . .

So we have to try to trust in the process, and try to not be poor losers if democracy doesn’t work in our favor. It’s not a perfect system – but it’s the best we got. We want to live together in freedom, with peace, liberty and justice for all, as it states in our 6\textsuperscript{th} principle.
The emphasis here is on “together,” which brings me to our last set of quotes. I choose them because they remind me of the fact that we – at home with our families, here in this congregation, and in this great country – live in relationship with each other. So – if your quotes are purple, let’s hear them!

*Democracy is itself, a religious faith. For some it comes close to being the only formal religion they have.* -E. B. White

*Democracy does not guarantee equality of conditions - it only guarantees equality of opportunity.* -Irving Kristol

*The only way to make sure people you agree with can speak is to support the rights of people you don’t agree with.* -Eleanor Holmes Norton

*Democracy means not "I am as good as you are" but "You are as good as I am."

- Theodore Parker

*As long as the differences and diversities of mankind exist, democracy must allow for compromise, for accommodation, and for the recognition of differences.*

- Eugene McCarthy

*To safeguard democracy the people must have a keen sense of independence, self-respect, and their oneness.* -Mohandas K. Gandhi

Thank you! I’ve started out by reading our fifth principle. It’s one out of seven, and although most of us agree with most of them, we are aware that in daily life they are not always easy to affirm and promote. But it’s always worthwhile. The democratic process makes it possible for us to be in Good Relationship with each other.

And that, after all, is why we are here, isn’t it?