



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

“Daring Democracy”

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5 November 2017

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Democracy was born in ancient Athens. 2,500 years ago, around the turn from the 5th to the 4th century B.C.E., when **revolts against the rule of tyrants gave people (δημο/dēmo-) the power (κρατία/-kratia) to rule**. Those uprisings gave us the word democracy (δημο-κρατία/dēmo-kratía) (Crick 14). But beyond that basic definition of “rule by the people,” we need to be honest that democracy is a word that is widely used and abused. Indeed, democracy is an example of what philosophers call “an essentially contested concept” with a lot of different people deploying it for a wide array of different purposes (1).

One of the clearest examples is the **track record of military dictators coopting the term democracy** to describe their regime. Here’s a few quick examples from the past century:

- Gamal Nasser (1918-1970), the second President of Egypt, said that he was the head of a “Presidential Democracy,” but was criticized for his “authoritarianism, human rights violations and the dominance of military over civil institutions....”
- Ayub Khan (1907 – 1974), the second President of Pakistan, said that he part of a “Basic Democracy,” but in reality he was the country’s “first martial law ruler who forcibly assumed the presidency.”
- Sukarno (1901 - 1970), the first President of Indonesia, said he was part of a “Guided Democracy.” In truth, he led a strong and growing autocracy.

- Francisco Franco (1892 - 1975), a Spanish general, said he led an “Organic Democracy,” but he was a military dictator “who violently suppressed opposition and dissent, banned culture seen as non-Spanish, and used concentration camps and forced labour.”
- Alfredo Stoessner (1912 - 2006), a President of Paraguay, said he led a “Selective Democracy,” but his 35-year-rule included "ruthless suppression of all opposition, a constant ‘state of siege’ that overruled civil liberties, and the torturing and killing of political opponents.”
- Rafael Trujillo (1891 - 1961), a president of the Dominican Republic, said he was part of a “Neo-Democracy,” and while he “brought the country a great deal of stability and prosperity throughout his 31-year reign, the price was high—civil liberties were non-existent and human rights violations were routine...and much of the country's wealth wound up in the hands of his family or close associates. Trujillo and his regime were responsible for the deaths of more than 50,000 people.” (Crick 8-9)

I’ve taken the time to quickly run through these examples because there is an important **pattern of authoritarian dictators perverting the word democracy** for their own selfish ends. They know the power of the word democracy. They know the appeal of making people feel like they are powerful. So they exploit the word democracy as part of their propaganda.

As the saying goes, “**When fascism comes to America, it will come wrapped in a flag and carrying a cross.**” In other words, any would-be authoritarian seeking to consolidate power unconstitutionally in our country will almost definitely exploit religion and patriotism as propaganda to further their cause.

However, the most troubling part is *not* the cynical truth that “nearly all contemporary political regimes, no matter how repressive, claim to be democracies of some sort”—because, of course, narcissistic demagogues lie, cheat, and steal to amass ever-greater power to the extent that we let them get away with it. **The truly troubling part is that a disturbing percentage of their citizens believe their propaganda:**

Perceptions of democratic reality are surprisingly robust in such unlikely places as Rwanda, Malaysia, and Kazakhstan. Even Chinese respondents were virtually indistinguishable from Americans, not only in their enthusiasm for democracy as

an ideal but also in their assessment of how democratically their own country is currently being governed. (Achen/Bartels 5-6)

This ease with which people can be manipulated has led some people to be *against* democracy.

Most famously, the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (c. 427 – c. 347 B.C.E.), whose lifetime spanned the coining of the term democracy, was not a fan. **He thought “we the people” were often less like informed citizens and more like a mob, “selfish, fickle, and inconsistent.”** He favored an *aristocracy*: rule by an educated elite—specifically by a “philosopher king”—which conveniently would put people like himself in charge (Crick 1).

In recent weeks, we have looked back on both the 100th Anniversary of the Russian Revolution and the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation to consider some of the major unintended consequences that result from those events—**consequences that were far different (and often far more dire) than anything their leaders intended or could have predicted.**

Democracy has also had its share of unintended consequences. Consider this passage from the philosopher Adam Kotsko:

Liberal democracy can easily give way to dictatorship, even with the constitution being formally in force. We know that liberal democracy is compatible with chattel slavery and racial discrimination — and indeed that the first modern democratic republic ever established, the United States, spent over half a century with a significant enslaved population and a further century with a disenfranchised population subject to mob violence. Liberal democracy is compatible with the equivalent of secret police, with extra-legal assassinations, with undeclared wars of aggression, with vast and increasing economic inequality, with mass unemployment and homelessness, with child poverty and hunger, with a huge prison population resulting from a racist approach to law enforcement, with essential public functions being handed over to private individuals for private gain, etc., etc., etc.

Part of the point here is that **“power to the people” is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for collective liberation in which we truly have “peace, liberty, and justice” for all**—not

merely for some. There are additional factors needed to give “we the people” the greatest likelihood of using our power wisely.

For instance, it is helpful to remind ourselves occasionally of what happened over the course of three crucial months, less than a hundred years ago in Europe. On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was *democratically* appointed to be chancellor of Germany. One month later on February 27, the Reichstag (the home of the German parliament) was burned down. **This “terrorist event” (which may actually have been an act of arson by the Nazis themselves) was used as an excuse to suspend civil liberties, including freedom of the press and freedom of association.** Another month later on March 23, the Enabling Act paved the way for the German Chancellor to be declared Führer (“Leader”) and for the Weimar Republic to devolve into a one-party dictatorship (Passmore 67-68).

You know how we talk about not “enabling” an addict? Well, the “Enabling Act” is a literal example of *enabling* a dictator to violate democratic norms. And part of how Germany has responded longterm to that catastrophic series of events is that today **“The German constitution forbids the formation of antidemocratic parties...and governments have been prepared to ban fascist organizations”** (Passmore 91). That means it is unconstitutional in Germany to usurp power in a way that removes accountability from the “consent of the governed.”

As historian Mark Bray has written in his important new book, Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook, vigilance is needed to protect democratic and constitutional norms because:

It doesn’t take that many fascists to make fascism.... When Mussolini was appointed prime minister in 1922 only about 7 to 8 percent of the Italian population, and only thirty-five of the more than five hundred members of parliament belonged to his National Fascist Party.... When Hitler was appointed chancellor in 1933, only about 1.3 percent of the population belonged to the National Socialist German Workers' Party. (140)

I am not making a blanket endorsement of Antifa, but I do recommend Bray’s book as a helpful historical overview of resistance movements against fascism. And if you are looking for a guide to tracking violations of our democratic and constitutional norms, I recommend **Bright Line**

Watch (brightlinewatch.org), a network of political scientists monitoring our country’s “democratic practices, their resilience, and potential threats.”

Now, in my remaining time, I would like to say a little more about practicing (and protecting) democracy for such a time as this by inviting us to consider three final angles: (1) realism, (2) pragmatism, and (3) hope. First: *realism*. **One of the most fascinating and disturbing books that I read after our recent presidential election is Democracy for Realists (Princeton University Press 2016).**

In contrast to the democratic ideals about engaged citizens creating a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” the social scientists who co-wrote Democracy for Realists show clear evidence that **“the great majority of citizens pay little attention to politics.”** Instead of having a lot of free time to carefully weigh evidence, people are busy. When election day arrives, rather than being led primarily by reason, studies show that most people “are swayed by how they *feel* about ‘the nature of the times,’ especially the current state of the economy”—which may not correspond to the actual state of the economy— and “by political loyalties typically acquired in childhood” (Achen/Bartels 1).

If we were to truly live into our UU Fifth Principle of **“The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large,”** we would need to cultivate many factors not currently present in this country:

- **“Effective participation”** - much higher percentages of people voting
- **“Enlightened understanding”** - a much more nuanced grasp of politics than is presently the case for most voters
- **“Control of the agenda”** - meaning “the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals” and much less bias toward corporations and the wealthiest citizens.
- **“Inclusion of adults”** - much less voter suppression than is the case today. (Achen/Bartels 6)

Tragically, “No existing government comes close to meeting these criteria.” Moreover, given the limitations of human nature arguably “no possible government could” achieve these criteria on any sort of large scale (Achen/Bartels 7).

Now, that's a heavy dose of *realism*. What about *pragmatism* and hope? Well, pragmatism is about "what works." So what might work to make our society more democratic? Here are three specific ideas from experts:

1. **Advocate for policies and politicians that support greater "economic and social equality."** The huge wealth gap in our country in which "the educated, the wealthy, and the well-connected" have a vastly disproportionate role in our political process is one of the greatest threats to our democracy (Achen/Bartels 325).
2. **"Make Election Day a day of celebration much like the Fourth of July."** Beyond the need to make Election Day a national holiday, experiments with organizing festivals at polling places ("offering food, fun, and music, but not alcohol" has shown a "moderately large and statistically significant impact on voting" (Moss 685-686).
3. **"Improve and expand civics instruction in our nation's schools"** (690). Studies have show that, tragically, civics instruction is not emphasized in most states today.

Now, I could list many more examples all day of what we could do: pass a Constitutional Amendment overturning Citizens United, get rid of the racist Electoral College, or create a constitutional Right to Vote. But the point is not only dreaming about change, but also turning our dreams into deeds.

And on turning our dreams into reality, I want to leave you with a note of *hope*. Two years ago at the annual UU General Assembly, delegates selected "The Corruption of Our Democracy" as the current four-year (2016-2020) Congregational Study/Action Issue (CSAI) for all UU congregations. As part of that, one of two "Common Reads" selected for all UUs to consider reading in this current year is Daring Democracy: Igniting Power, Meaning, and Connection for the America We Want by Frances Moore Lappe and Adam Eichen (Beacon Press, 2017). In the spirit of full disclosure, **I would much more strongly recommend the other UU Common Read, Centering: Navigating Race, Authenticity, and Power in Ministry**. But there are two passages in particular that I would highlight from *Daring Democracy*.

I will readily grant that "power to the people" has not always gone well in our democracy. **Sometimes the people have chosen poorly and been swayed by con men, hucksters, snake oil salesmen, and demagogues. However, there is also a strong history in**

our country of the people wielding their power for justice and sometimes succeeding against stunning odds:

- At our founding, farmers, shopkeepers, and laborers... defeated an empire.
- Since then, black Americans risked their lives to fight against the subjection of enslavement and then for their democratic rights!
- Women fought for decades to secure suffrage.
- In the 1930s, a democratic upsurge by workers led to the New Deal, which achieved basic protections of human dignity in the workplace and in old age....
- Soon thereafter, McCarthyism's witch-hunts dimmed our democracy, but brave Americans fought back.
- And by the 1960s, we began stepping up to halt an unwise war, demand civil rights protections, and embrace a War on Poverty that by the early seventies had cut the poverty rate almost in half....

We need to remind ourselves sometimes of historic successes in the movement for social justice because, "It's not a huge challenge that kills the human spirit. **What most defeats us is feeling useless.... A sense of futility is what destroys us**" (4).

So as we discern what actions we might take, individually and collectively in the coming weeks, months, and years, to strengthen our democracy, past successes can embolden us to realize that more is possible than we realize. Consider that,

Before they happened, what odds would anyone have given to:

- Lyndon B. Johnson, a president from Texas with prior antagonism toward civil rights passing the historic 1965 Voting Rights Act?
- Citizens of South Dakota [a historically conservative state] passing public financing of elections in 2016
- A retired attorney in Hawaii one night in late 2016 asking her Facebook friends what they thought about a women's march...the day after the presidential inauguration, then waking up to find that ten thousand people had enthusiastically responded? (Not to mention her idea turning into a multimillion-person global protest!)

- Or citizens' actions blocking the repeal of the Affordable Care Act in early 2017?

The co-authors of *Daring Democracy* conclude that, “Despair itself is ultimately our only enemy, and we’ve become evermore clear that there’s an effective antidote: meaningful action we take together (161-162).