



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

## How Democracies Die & An Education in Hope

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Today we are precisely one year away from the next U.S. presidential election, which will be held on November 3, 2020. As we begin to be drawn inexorably into another election season, I offer the periodic reminder that together as a UU congregation, we can be **political, but not partisan.**

Sometimes there is confusion in both directions. I am occasionally asked how we can be political if there is a “separation of church and state.” The separation of church and state is a tremendously good idea—I’m all for it—but it does not mean that religion and government should have nothing to do with one another. In the language of the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” (So, on the government side, it is unconstitutional to choose an official state religion that gets special treatment.) The First Amendment continues regarding religion that Congress shall also make no law “prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” (So here on the religion side we are free to follow the dictates of our conscience.)

One of my touchstones for understanding the proper relationship of church and state is from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who wrote that a religious community (not limited to a Christian church):

must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the **conscience of the state.** It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If [a religious community] does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or

spiritual authority.

From this perspective, if we are honest, we UUs are clearly political: even a cursory glance at our [UU Principles](#) shows the need to be engaged in the political process if we are to help build the world we dream about. There is, for instance, arguably no way to reach “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all” without trying to influence politics. And historically, many of our UU forebears were active in movements for social change from abolition to women’s suffrage, and from the civil rights movement to same sex marriage rights.

But remember the key distinction: we are **political, but *not partisan***.

Individually many of us are supporters of particular political parties or candidates, but we do not collectively as a congregation endorse candidates or support political parties. Within our big tent of Unitarian Universalism, we are on much firmer ground when we focus on the *values* we all have in common. Our motivations to join all those diverse and historic struggles for social justice are the same core values: that every human being has the “inherent worth and dignity of every person,” that we should treat all others with “justice, equity and compassion,” and that we should “[Side with love](#).”

So in the coming election year, as we are increasingly bombarded with candidates seeking election to public office, one touchstone that may be helpful to you is the following set of [questions for candidates based on our UU Principles](#). If any of you actually ask one or more of these questions to real-life politicians in town halls and other settings in the coming year, let me know the responses you receive:

1. How do your policy proposals reflect the inherent worth and dignity of every person?
2. If elected, how will your decisions demonstrate your commitment to justice, equity and compassion in human relations?
3. How will you encourage acceptance across party lines?
4. What insights from your own search for truth and meaning guide you as a political leader?
5. What are your ideas for improving our democratic process?

6. Within our international community, how will you work effectively towards the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all?
7. Acknowledging our global interdependence, how will your decisions impact our planet and future generations?
8. What specific actions will you take to [accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions](#)—and build a diverse, multicultural society?

For now, one year before the next major Election Day, and keeping in mind Dr. King's challenge for us to be the "conscience of the state," what does it mean at such a time as this to advocate for what our UU Fifth Principle calls "The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large?"

In reflecting on this question, one of the most helpful resources I have found is Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's powerful and accessible book, published last year with the sobering title of How Democracies Die. Both authors are professors of government at Harvard University. For most of their careers, they have been teaching, writing, and researching about historic dangers to democracy (Europe in the 1930s or Latin America in the 1970s) as well as new forms of contemporary authoritarianism around the world. But **until the last few years, they never anticipated asking if democracy was in danger here at home** (1).

Previously, they had trust in the strong supports for our democratic traditions:

- Our Constitution,
- Our national creed of freedom and equality,
- Our historically robust middle class,
- Our high levels of wealth and education, and
- Our large, diversified private sector. (1)

But serious warning signs have started to appear. In their words:

American states, which were once praised by the great jurist Louis Brandeis as 'laboratories of democracy,' are in danger of becoming laboratories of authoritarianism as those in power rewrite electoral rules, redraw constituencies, and even redesign voting rights to ensure that they do not lose. And **in 2016, for the first time in U.S. history, a man**

**with no experience in public office, little observable commitment to constitutional rights, and clear authoritarian tendencies was elected president. (2)**

To be clear up front, I will not try to parse the impeachment investigation. (You already have *The Washington Post* and many other media outlets doing that.) And for anyone wondering, I planned this sermon in June as my annual sermon on our UU Fifth Principle of democracy that I do each year around Election Day. And there is almost nothing I am saying this morning that I would have said differently if I had preached this sermon five months ago. (The situation has been dire for quite a while.) And **although partisan politics are appropriately out of bounds, threats to our democracy are always in play.**

One renowned guide for protecting democratic norms is a small but seminal book published in 1978 titled *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* by the late Juan Linz (1926 - 2013), who for many years was a professor of sociology and political science at Yale University. “Born in Weimar Germany and raised amid Spain’s civil War, Linz knew all too well the perils of losing a democracy,” and he laid the foundations for an authoritarianism litmus test for determining whether a politician is acting anti-democratically (21).

According to the above political scientists, **there is significant cause for concern if a politician does even one of the following:**

1. rejects in words or action, the democratic rules of the game,
2. denies the legitimacy of opponents,
3. tolerates or encourages violence,
4. indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media (21-22)

If you are curious to learn more, Levisky’s and Ziblatt’s book *How Democracies Die* goes into the further details about each of those four categories (23-34).

They also detail—in ways we need to be direct and honest about—that President Trump has met all four criteria of that litmus test (65-67). To list only a few highlights:

1. President Trump showed a **weak commitment to the democratic rules of the game** when he repeatedly “questioned the legitimacy of the electoral process and made the unprecedented suggestion that he might not accept the results of the 2016 Election” (61).
2. He **denied his opponent’s legitimacy** both through his “birther” conspiracy theories about President Obama and through repeatedly declaring that Hillary Clinton “has to go to jail” and chanting “Lock her up!” (62).
3. Candidate Trump repeatedly **encouraged violence**—emboldening “supporters who physically assaulted reporters...and responding to protesters at his rallies by inciting violence among his supporters” (62-64).
4. He has also regularly shown a **“readiness to curtail the civil liberties of rivals and critics”** (64).

I hope I am being clear that irrespective of partisan political differences, these anti-democratic and uncivil actions are neither normal nor ever acceptable in a liberal democracy such as the United States. “With the exception of Richard Nixon, no major-party presidential candidate met even one of these four criteria over the last century.... **No other major presidential candidate in modern U.S. history, including Nixon, has demonstrated such a weak public commitment to constitutional rights and democratic norms**” (65).

I should also add one other significant factor: President Trump’s compulsive lying and rampant use of Orwellian disinformation. He recently passed his 1,000th day in office, and according to the Fact Checker’s database used by *The Washington Post*, the latest count is that he has made 13,435 false or misleading claims during his time as president. **“From the start of his presidency, he has averaged nearly 14 false or misleading claims a day.”** To be honest, this rate of “exaggerated numbers, unwarranted boasts and outright falsehoods” is exhausting—and that is part of the point.

I could continue, but I want to emphasize not only the many real and present dangers to our democracy, but also why it is vital nevertheless to remain hopeful. And if

you are in search of some hope at such a time as this, one book I would recommend is Hope in the Dark by Rebecca Solnit.

Now, I will readily admit that hope, wrongly understood, can seem naïve, an unwarranted optimism. False hope can make you want to scream, “Don’t you see how bad it is!” That is not the hope we need. **“Hope is not the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine”** (xiii). There is no guarantee of a better future. But if we give up hope of even the possibility that things *could* change for the better, then we capitulate all our power to the corrupt powers that be (xi).

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire is best known for his paradigm-shifting book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. But for our current situation, his lesser-known follow-up *Pedagogy of Hope* may be more instructive. Here’s one crucial quote from that book: “Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. And hopelessness can turn into tragic despair. Hence the need for a kind of **education in hope**” (12). I love that idea—of giving ourselves an education in hope.

Here’s the thing: no one really knows what the future holds. But we do ourselves and our forebears a disservice when we forget how much unlikely change has already happened. There was no guarantee that abolitionists would win the struggle to end slavery in the nineteenth century, that suffragettes would win the right to vote for women in the early twentieth century, that the freedom riders and so many other racial justice activists would come out on top in the civil rights movement, that LGBTQ+ citizens of this country would achieve same-sex marriage rights. We can do hard things!

In contrast, however, there are those in every age who benefit from claiming that the *status quo* is “immutable, inevitable, and invulnerable.” But it is none of those things (xix). Everything changes. The only real guarantee is *impermanence*. As you sometimes hear in meditation circles, “Whatever has the nature to arise—whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—also has the nature to pass away.” Whatever is the present case, “*This too shall pass.*” Change is gonna come. Our invitation, our call, our challenge is to influence the direction in which change happens—to help “bend the arc of the universe toward justice.”

Consider this quote from Václav Havel (1936-2011), written from a jail cell where he had been unjustly imprisoned for writing dissident literature. A few years later he would be elected President of Czechoslovakia, but there was no guarantee of that victory when he penned these words:

The kind of hope I often think about (especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison) I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world.... Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, **an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to success.** (11)

As UUs, we are called to give ourselves—our lives, our time, our energy—in the struggle for human dignity, justice, equity, compassion, peace, liberty, and democracy, *not* because we are guaranteed to achieve those goals, but because they are good and true and right.

Over the last few years as our core values have been increasingly under threat, one of my guides has been the frequently prescient [Sarah Kendzior](#). She is a journalist with an academic expertise on authoritarianism. The focus of her [doctoral dissertation](#) was “how the Uzbekistan dictatorship employed the Internet to undermine public trust in and manipulate the media,” so let’s say she has quite the skill set for connecting the dots with current events here in the U.S.

On November 18, 2016, ten days after the most recent presidential election, she wrote a [powerful essay](#) seeking to draw on what she had learned from studying totalitarianism in the states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, for what we might do to counter authoritarianism here in the U.S. I’ll share with you just a brief excerpt of her wisdom for such a time as this:

Write down  
what you value;

what standards you hold for yourself and for others.

Write about

your dreams for the future and  
your hopes for your children.

Write about

the struggle of your ancestors and  
how the hardship they overcame  
shaped the person you are today.....

You still have your freedom,  
so use it.

There are many groups organizing for both  
resistance and subsistence,  
but we are heading into dark times,  
and you need to be your own light.

Do not accept brutality and cruelty as normal  
even if it is sanctioned.

Protect the vulnerable and  
encourage the afraid.

If you are brave,  
stand up for others.

If you cannot be brave—  
and it is often hard to be brave—  
be kind.

But most of all,  
never lose sight of  
who you are and  
what you value.

If you find yourself doing something  
that feels questionable or wrong  
a few months or years from now,  
find that essay you wrote on who you are and read it.



Ask if that version of yourself would have done the same thing.

And if the answer is no?

Don't do it.