

"Democracy is Really About People Power"
Sermon and Worship Service for
The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wayne County, Ohio
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Sermon "Democracy is Really about People Power"

Rev. Jennie

These are times in our nation when it is challenging to clarify what "democracy" means. These are times in our nation when it is more important than ever to clarify what "democracy means." These are times in our nation when it is essential that we remember, for ourselves, and convey to others, that democracy is really about "people power." We remember, and we can re-center on, the fact that democracy is really about people power when we look to scholarship of and about our nation, and scholarship within our denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association. And we can even be newly enlightened and inspired when we look to the origin and evolution of something like the exquisite Unitarian Universalist song that the choir sang for us this morning, Sarah Dan Jones' "Meditation on Breathing." Clarifying for ourselves that democracy is really about people power not only grounds and inspire us individually-- It can serve to ground and inspire others all around the world.

I have some wisdom from two wise teachers to share with you this morning. The sociologist and religious writer Parker Palmer, and the famous twentieth century theologian, James Luther Adams, who was a Unitarian Universalist. Parker Palmer wrote his book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy – The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*, in 2011. But he has reissued it with a new introduction that he wrote in 2014. It is that introduction that I found most helpful in preparing for our service this morning. In it, he tells the story of a seventy-one year old man, Rod House, a resident of La Veta, Colorado, population 800. Inspired by the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations, and by reading Parker Palmer's book, Mr. House, entirely on his own, set up a tent outside the La Veta library. He stated that he planned to camp out there in an effort to encourage conversation across the categories and special interest areas that divide us. He is a veteran of the U.S. Air Force who has lived through some times when he has felt less patriotic, yet recently, more so. He said, "I love my country and I want to help fix it... I have ten grandchildren and I care about their future and that is why

I am here.” To Parker Palmer, the point of Rod House’s story is that, “none of us –no matter how small the scope of our actions may be, or how far off the beaten track we live– is without ways to make our voice heard and invite others to speak their voices as well... By speaking his voice, House helped a number of people in his hometown become more thoughtful not only about some critical problems in this country, but also about the critical role ‘We the People’ play in finding solutions.” Rod and his wife became more deeply engaged citizens, and led a book study group of Parker Palmer’s book. They wrote an editorial to their local paper that said, “Democracy is weakened when we only speak with those who share our views . . . To be effective, we need the participation of folks from... all walks of life– ranchers, teachers, business owners, the financially secure and those struggling to make ends meet, new comers and old-timers.”

I feel inspired and motivated by Rod House’s story. But Parker Palmer found that when he told people about what Rod House did, they reacted in distinctly different ways. Parker Palmer then developed a model of ways people view power– their own personal power, and that of institutions. We have become accustomed to seeing the divides in our nation along lines of political parties, or urban versus rural, or education level, or liberal versus conservative, etc. But Palmer says that some people found Rod House’s story hopeful, and others saw it as “just another feel-good anecdote.” Palmer writes:

“First, there is the divide between (a) people who believe in the power of ideas, values, commitments, and visions– a/k/a the power of the human heart, and (b) those who believe that power comes only from possessing or having access to social status, wealth, positional leadership, and the capacity to command institutional resources. This is the divide between those who believe that power is found within us as well as outside us, and those for whom all power is external to the self. Second, there is the divide between (a) people who believe in ‘the power of one’ to act on the heart’s imperatives, especially when such an act calls a community of shared concern into being, and (b) those who believe that ordinary people, alone or together, are fundamentally powerless in a society dominated by mass institutions. This is a variant on the first divide, of course. But, here, those who disbelieve in the power of the human heart have doubled down on their disbelief. Not only do they regard the heart as inherently powerless– they believe it remains powerless even when we follow the heart’s imperatives with personal and communal actions. To the argument that community has the capacity to multiply personal power many times over, they respond, ‘a thousand times zero is zero.’ Third, there is the divide between (a) those who believe in the power of small, slow, invisible, underground processes, and (b) those who believe that only

processes that yield large-scale visible results in the short term qualify as powerful. The former understand the importance of political infrastructure, and have the patience to work away at strengthening it, even when their work is slow to yield measurable outcomes and never generates headlines. The latter seek quick fixes that look like solutions, whether or not they solve anything— and, if they fail to achieve them, either jump to the next quick fix or quit the field.”

Palmer goes on to say, “As I began to reject the traditional left-right notion of our great political divide in favor of a schema built on different assumptions about the nature of power, I began to see something hopeful. Redefined this way, the ‘great divide’ does not parallel the left-right divide: it is nonpartisan. To cite but two examples, both the Occupy Movement and the Tea Party are made up of people who believe in the power of ideas and values, the power of one multiplied in community, and the power of invisible, long-term, infrastructure work. On those counts, at least, there is no fundamental difference between groups that are poles apart ideologically.”

When our divided nation is viewed through Palmer’s schema, there is hope that Americans can come together and define the Common Good, and work to make it actual.

And that is exactly what we have to do, to make our nation more safe and peaceful, and to preserve the very democracy on which our nation was founded. So says the great scholar and social activist James Luther Adams. He writes about this in his well-known essay on Voluntary Associations. He calls Voluntary Associations “the indispensable discipline of social responsibility.” Adams begins his essay by describing his trip to Germany a few years before the Nazis came into power. He was visiting Nuremberg in 1927. There was a mass meeting of the National Socialists, with a parade. He asked some people on the sidelines to explain the meaning of the swastika. His questions led to his becoming engaged in a heated argument. Suddenly, someone seized him from behind and hauled him out of the crowd. As it turned out, the German man who grabbed Adams, saved him. He said to Adams, “You fool. Don’t you know? In Germany today when you are watching a parade, you either keep your mouth shut, or you get your head bashed in.” The German man, a sailor in the merchant marines, brought Adams back to his apartment to share a modest dinner, yet with abundant hospitality, with his family. [The German man had visited America when he was in the merchant marines. Americans had been welcoming and gracious to him. So that is part of why he reached out to Adams.] On reflection, Adams realized that the political conditions he experienced in Germany at that time were the beginnings of

the abolishment of freedom of association, which was leading to totalitarianism. He then had to ask himself, "What in your typical behavior as an American citizen have you done that would help to prevent the rise of authoritarian government in your own country? [and] What disciplines of democracy (except voting) have you habitually undertaking *with other people* which could serve in any way directly to affect public policy? More bluntly stated: I asked myself, What precisely is the difference between you and a political idiot?"

Adams then cites the German theologian Karl Barth as having stressed that "every conscientious German citizen should now participate actively in voluntary associations committed to the task of making democracy work." Adams then cites what, over a hundred years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about voluntary associations in America. "Libraries, hospitals, fire prevention, and [associations] for political and philanthropic purposes." Adams writes that,

"Taken together, these associations... represent the institutional articulation of the pluralistic society." They have their roots in the Protestant Reformation, and in the separation of church and state. And being engaged in voluntary associations is how we get better at the processes of fairly hearing and honoring differences of opinion, reaching consensus, and forming coalitions that act to make life more fair for all citizens, including "securing civil liberties or better housing, or with overcoming racial discrimination."

He then says, "In short, the voluntary association is a means for the institutionalizing of gradual revolution." Basically, Adams wrote that there will always be associations devoted only to special interests, and they pressure our government. Therefore, to insure the health of our democracy, there must also be associations devoted to the general welfare, that counterbalance the special interest groups. Adams asserts, "Human sinfulness expresses itself, then, in the indifference of the average citizen who is so impotent, so idiotic in the sense of that word's Greet root (that is, privatized), as not to exercise freedom of association for the sake of the general welfare and for the sake of becoming a responsible self." Adams then harkens back to the story at the beginning of his essay. He concludes by stating, "In the democratic society the non-participating citizens bash their own heads in. The living democratic society requires the disciplines of discussion and common action for the determination of policy."

Both Parker Palmer and James Luther Adams have given us much to think about, and I look forward to talking about their ideas and visions with you. And I think that the most important element of both of their theories is the communal

piece. They both believe that it is through collective action that communities are made more safe and fair for all people, and democracies are preserved and saved. I believe that, too. Though there are times when any of us can feel that belief wavering, when we wonder, "What really is the power of only one person?" There, again, the joining together with other people can, not only effect progressive change over time, but doing so can inspire and motivate us, anew.

I'll close this morning with the story of the origin and evolution of the exquisite Unitarian Universalist song that the choir sang for us led this morning, "Meditation on Breathing." Its composer, Sarah Dan Jones wrote:

"I wrote the song just after September 11th [2001]. I was so filled with despair, and I needed to channel that into some hope. When the call came for [submissions for the new Unitarian Universalist hymnal] 'Singing the Journey,' I decided to submit the chorus as a chant. Susan Peck helped me set it (she actually wrote the descant line). The song has since taken on a life of its own. It was sung at a student vigil after the Virginia Tech shootings (I know that because of an article in the Washington Post that someone brought to my attention. The text was listed, but no attribution)... It has been sung at rallies all over the place – Phoenix GA [General Assembly] (and before, when folks were arrested protesting Arpaio). I have given permission for its use at camps, [and for] congregations who put together their own 'hymnal,' and [for] youth groups. I have had requests from all over North America, and Europe. I have no idea how and where it is being sung, so I have to let that go. When folks talk to me about it (like when I sing it when visiting out), they range from parents using it to sing their kids to sleep, adults using it in meditation, [and even] hospice choirs. Once, a man told me about how he and his husband had purchased two pigmy goats – they were in the back seat being driven to their new home and making all kinds of noises. The men starting singing the chant, and the goats calmed down. (I often tell that story and note how the chant is multi-species!!)." [End of quote.]

Let us remember that one person really does have the power to spread healing throughout the world-- healing that is birthed in places like this very room. [Let us sing.]

*Closing Hymn #1023 "Building Bridges"

Closing Words from, "How to Build Community" The Syracuse Cultural Workers

"Turn off your TV; Leave your house; Know your neighbors; Look up when you are walking; Greet people; Use your library; Buy from local merchants; Help a lost dog; Garden together; Honor elders; Pick up litter; Read stories aloud; Talk to the mail carrier; Listen to the birds; Help carry something heavy; Ask for help when you need it; Sing together; Listen before you react to anger; Learn from new and uncomfortable angles; Know that no one is silent, though many are not heard. Work to change this."