

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
America: The Glorious Vision
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 11, 2018

Sermon

I read a little this past week about the insanity of that final day of World War One combat. The Germans agreed to end all hostilities before 6am that morning. The fighting did not stop at that moment however. The Allies decided that instead of ending the war immediately, they would wait for the visually interesting string of 1's, the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Another estimated ten thousand people died before the signal to cease-fire. One of the last people to die in "regulation" so to speak was a French soldier named [Augustin Trébuchon](#). He was shot and killed at 10:45am by a German sniper as he was spreading the news about where to gather for lunch to celebrate the end of the war. 15 minutes later, that sniper fire would have been a war crime.

Anyone who spends even a little time studying war knows that many, many combatants die in ignoble ways. There is no glory being blown up by an IED, dying from an infection or disease as countless have in every war, or probably the worst, killed by friendly fire. Nor is any meaning to be found in what is euphemistically called "collateral damage" killing innocent civilians, women, children and the aged.

So when we, as a nation, ask our young men and women to put their lives in danger and their moral identity at risk, we'd better have a damn good reason. They need to know and feel deeply exactly what they are defending. Yes, they want to protect comrades on the field and friends and family at home, but they also need a larger moral purpose. When we send them to war that higher purpose must include protecting what is precious about America, our core values and ideals we inherit from the Founders of this country.

This morning I want to remind us of the glorious vision upon which this nation was founded; a vision that wasn't at all common 250 years ago and remains very precious today.

Let us begin by remembering those stirring words from the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,

Ultimate respect for the agency, power and value of the individual citizen is a core foundation for the new way of governing that arose in America. Being endowed with unalienable Rights, the right to life, the right to liberty and the right to pursue happiness had never been offered by a government before. Usually monarchs have all the power and their subjects (not people or citizens) exist to serve their master. That is their meaning and purpose, not self-actualization.

It is from here that flow all the liberties we enjoy, freedom of expression, gathering, beliefs, and privacy. Our personal autonomy and responsibility, our freedom of action, self-reflection and development all have a home in unalienable rights to exist as an independent person.

Our founders were very clear about rejecting any authoritarian governmental structure that resembled the hated monarchy they suffered under as British subjects. The consent of the governed was crucial to the legitimacy of any government they would accept. And if it lost their consent, they could create a new one. Absolutely no divine right of kings or queens or an aristocracy! The only authority they recognized was the rule of law with equal application and protection. To protect their liberty, their individual freedom, any government needed to be limited, with the powers divided and with lots of checks and balances against abuse.

What was extremely precious, innovative, and unusual at the time of the founding of this nation was the nature of citizenship. One is not American because of a particular ethnic, racial or religious identity. Our Founders were very intentional about this. From the time of the first Europeans and Africans placing a foot on this continent, there has been no common ethnic, racial or religious identity of the settlers who arrived. From the very beginning of this nation has been the idea of plurality; *E Pluribus Unum* – Out of many, one. Built into our institutional DNA has been the ethic of toleration of difference. What unites us as a nation are shared values, values like hard work, self-reliance, honesty, neighborliness, an egalitarian and cooperative spirit.

Valuing liberty and individual freedom, anti-authoritarian, limited government and a pluralistic civic culture are central to what makes America great and worth defending. We are very fortunate that our Founders were clever enough to design a form of government that has enshrined these values and protected them all these years. They are attractive values that draw people to want to settle here and become Americans. Yes it is very messy. Yes, it started with glaring flaws like slavery. But those core values were the engines that drove the change to bring freedom to the captives and rights to the marginalized and oppressed.

Those values remain precious to this day. When we ask soldiers to risk their lives for these values it ennobles their service and their sacrifices, even if they are not glorious. The meaning is in serving this higher purpose.

It is very important to note that that higher purpose isn't nationalism but rather patriotism. Our nation is not founded on the principles of blood and soil. It isn't a state dedicated to a place or a church or a charismatic leader. Patriotism is a dedication to defend the Constitution of the United States. It is a dedication to defend a political system and vision, not an ethnic group or a plot of land. Our Founders declared independence from the British Empire to form a more perfect political union, to fulfill a political ideal.

It would be a great source of shame for us as a nation if we falter in living up to these ideals, to the heritage we ask our men and women in uniform to defend.

We are faltering right now.

One source of that faltering comes from a disturbing absence in the words of our current president. In my research I came across an excellent article I commend to you by Daniel Krauthammer titled, "What Makes America Great?" He writes:

Unlike every president (and presidential candidate) in living memory, Donald Trump almost never employs the ideas and language of the Founders. Try to think of a time you have heard him extol liberty, freedom, democracy, rights, equality, justice—or even utter the words. His speechwriters from time to time insert a few token phrases into his prepared speeches. But in Trump's unprepared remarks at rallies, in debate performances, TV interviews, press conferences, tweets, they barely appear. Clearly, they do not preoccupy him. Our ideals and their fulfillment are not, in his view, what made America great.

So what is it that actually does make America great? The president's answer has always been crystal clear: winning. . . . His language is never about political ideals; it is about defeating opponents, being better than the other guy—*win, beat, kill, huge, rich, big league*.

From “[What Makes America Great?](#)” by DANIEL KRAUTHAMMER for *the Weekly Standard*, April 28, 2017

Another example of ongoing shame for New Yorkers is the corruption that happens here in the halls of the state legislature and the governor's office just down the hill from us. Practically on a yearly basis, legislative leaders are arrested, stand trial and are convicted of taking money for cutting deals with the state. You've got to pay to play here if you want a big state contract. The Moreland Commission is just the latest casualty of trying to rein in this corruption.

What are the checks and balances that can stop this abuse of power at the federal and state levels? It should be you and me through our participation as citizens in government and by voting the corrupt out of office and voting in responsible candidates. Then holding those candidate's feet to the fire to deliver on their promises.

Unfortunately that process doesn't always work.

I'm mindful of one example from my own life. August 20th, 19 year old Ellazar Williams was shot while running away from Albany Police detectives. The bullet hit him in the back, damaging his spinal cord and paralyzing him from the chest down. He will never run away from anyone ever again.

Because Ellazar didn't die, there was no automatic outside investigation of the incident by the attorney general's office. The Albany Police Department did an internal investigation and cleared the detective who shot him. Two problems, though, linger. Ellazar was shot in the back which suggests he was not a threat to the detective's life. There is also video of the incident that doesn't agree with the findings of the investigation.

Local justice advocate Alice Green has been keeping this in the news and asking questions. I too share her concerns but missed the first couple of rallies to ask for further investigation of the incident. I didn't get to one of those rallies until Thursday a week ago in front of the North Albany Police Station on Henry Johnson Boulevard. A small group of about thirty protesters assembled and heard from different speakers demanding an independent, outside investigation of the incident.

I was pleased to see Jacqui Williams, member of this congregation there and involved. I wished I'd seen a few more of our membership turning up for it. Excessive use of violence against black folks is what initiated the Black Lives Matter movement. This is our own incident, right here, where we could make a statement.

And yet, I had already missed a couple of these rallies and I hadn't shown much support until putting my signature on a letter from Alice Green's organization to the District Attorney and the Attorney General's office that same week. And I hadn't [contributed to a support fund](#) for Ellazar either until two days ago.

The reality of my life is I can't be everywhere, hard as I try to be as many places as I can – and I'll never be able to do what Rep. Paul Tonko does to be everywhere at all times. We have to make choices and set priorities. The good news is, when there are lots of us joining together to make a positive difference, the little we can do gets magnified when we work in solidarity with others.

And the opportunities for making a positive difference locally are enormous with the New York State Senate having a majority of Democrats. Many of the initiatives we've been working on with our statewide advocacy network, [Interfaith Impact](#), have a good chance to move this year. It has been very frustrating sitting and waiting, year after year, for fuller protection of women's reproductive health to happen. Criminal justice reform has also been bogged down. Transgender rights legislation has a chance to move now. And maybe we've got a real chance for health care reform and climate change legislation.

Our Unitarian Universalist voice is needed to speak up for justice for people like Ellazar Williams and [Dahmeek McDonald](#), the 22 year old Black resident of Troy who was shot in the head by a police officer a year before. I'm hoping the election of Mary Pat Donnelly in Rensselaer as district attorney will start making a difference. Our voice will be important in the shaping of legislation in the 2019 session as we seek humane treatment for those who are incarcerated, limiting solitary confinement and keeping people out of jail with bail reform as they work their way through the justice system.

Unitarian Universalist values mirror bedrock American values. Our unalienable rights that we are endowed with align with our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Our second principle is justice, equity and compassion in human relations also connects with those unalienable rights. Our fifth principle celebrates the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregation and in society at large. If America identified a civic religion and culture, I often claim that it would be Unitarian Universalism.

Because our values closely align with American values, we have a special responsibility to protect them and advocate for them in the public square. I'll have more to say about that next week.

As one person, we can have influence, but can't really move the legislative needle.

As a congregation we can have a much larger impact, especially on local issues.

As a religious movement working in coalition with other progressive religious advocates we can do

even more and start to have a national impact.
As a principled nation we can shape the world.

It all begins with a change of attitude.

It begins by being willing to be part of a lifelong commitment to being part of the solution.
It begins when we choose to stop being part of the problem or not being engaged at all.

Democracy only works when we all are willing to participate.
Democracy works when we are willing to be changed by the process.

When we are willing to participate and
When we are willing to be changed is
 when the Spirit of Life awakens in us and between us and
 can move us to form a more perfect union ... together.

Benediction

From [Parker Palmer's book](#), *Healing the Heart of Democracy*:

Americans are deeply divided on issues ranging from supporting public education to financing health care to the role of government itself. We may not be able to agree on the details, but if we believe in our form of government, we must agree [to make] preserving democracy itself the focus of our concern. We must be able to say, in unison: It is the common good to hold our political differences and the conflicts they create in a way that does not unravel the civic community on which democracy depends.