

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“The American Tradition of Dissent”

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore September 23, 2018

Call to Celebration

Dissent is a powerful force in America! When people are unhappy about something, they find each other and make their concerns heard. The Freedom Riders, the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the march across the Edmond Pettus Bridge in Selma were powerful moments of dissent that initiated transforming changes in America.

Some of us will remember an organization called ACT-UP, which aggressively advocated for people dying of AIDS. Formed in 1987, they demanded greater access to experimental AIDS drugs. One time ACT-UP infiltrated the New York Stock Exchange and chained themselves to the VIP balcony! When they got access to them they lobbied to reduce their high cost so people with AIDS could afford to get access to experimental medications like AZT, one of the first effective AIDS drugs.

Love too can also be a powerful force of dissent. No one died to my knowledge or was injured as part of the Marriage Equality movement. Just by people declaring their love for each other publicly and advocating for the legal right to marry, minds and hearts were changed in less than one generation, less than 10 years here in New York!

Love is the spirit and heart of this congregation. When we dissent, it is to resist that which interferes with the power of love to transform us and our world into heaven on earth that goes by the name Beloved Community.

May love be in our hearts this morning as we join together in the celebration of life.

Spoken Meditation

You've heard expressions like “love your enemy”
and “hate the sin and love the sinner,”
and wish for the happiness of all beings.

These are sweet sounding sentiments
that are extremely hard to put into practice
especially when we disagree or feel threatened.

How do we dissent and
resist institutional and systemic evil all around us
without diminishing another's inherent worth and dignity?
Especially if they don't share our politics?

When we get lost in aversion and our heart closes to another
may we find *within* ourselves
a feeling of connection to a greater source of love.

However you name that greater source,
 in a way that makes sense to you,
 know that love is a real, powerful force in us and beyond us
 a Presence greater than it is possible for us to imagine.
 Never underestimate what love can do
 to make a difference for the good.

In the difficult moments of our lives,
 and I know some of you are going through them now,
 Remember that love is real, present and available.
 Remember love can change us and make the difference
 even when we think we can't make any difference at all.

May that love be with us now
 as we enter a time of silence together.

Sermon

To love the body, the body electric, is a radical affirmation of our inherent worth and dignity we celebrate as our first principle of Unitarian Universalism. It **IS** the celebration of life that can only happen in bodies. Yet there are those who seek to corrupt and defile the body who do not honor it and seek its destruction.

The Spirit of Life in us resists, it dissents from the process of de-humanization.

Important as it is, these are not good times for dissent.

Not that we don't see a lot of it. I don't know about you, but my email box is full of opportunities to sign a petition against this, send a letter about that, show up for an urgent cause to make my voice heard. The problems in the world always seem like we are in the worst of times threatened from every direction.

What is different now is how ineffective I feel when I do sign, write and protest. This is not an unfamiliar feeling. Because politics in New York are dominated by the governor, unless you have the governor's support, it is hard to get anything done. Urgent issues are impossible to move until the governor decides to make it a priority.

So I've grown accustomed to being frustrated in New York State politics.

But now at the federal level, as the Kavanaugh Supreme Court nomination rolls forward with serious allegations against him of sexual misconduct, one can feel a little distressed. Trump is not a politician and ignores dissent as much as he can. He gets away with it most of the time because he has the backing of Republicans who control both the House and the Senate. In a time of one party rule, Trump is mostly insulated from dissent.

It does get through to him on occasion when Trump insults the memory of John McCain or defends Putin too openly. But as long as Trump puts conservative judges on the bench and signs Republican legislation, they let Trump be Trump no matter what the dissenters say.

I want to remind us this morning, especially the weary and frustrated activists among us, that dissent is a core American value that is older than America itself.

Inspiration for my words this morning comes from the presenters I heard at Chautauqua this past summer. The theme for the week was “The Ethics of Dissent.” One of them, history professor Dr. Ralph Young, reminded me of our vigorous and raucous history of dissent in America.

He pointed out some of the first folks to settle in New England were the Puritans, our reviled Calvinist ancestors. The Puritans were dissenters from the Church of England. They were joined by other dissenters like the Quakers and the Mennonites. But once you start dissenting, it is hard to stop. Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams both dissented against the Puritans and got thrown out of the Massachusetts colony. Williams was a very important dissenter around the separation of church and state and intolerance of religious diversity. He was also very concerned about the native peoples who were not being treated fairly. Williams headed to what is now Providence, Rhode Island to found a colony along the lines of his dissent.

Another prominent early dissenter from our history was a newspaper publisher in New York City named John Peter Zenger. He wrote in his newspaper about the corruption of Governor William Cosby. Cosby took him to court for libel in 1733. In the past, the ruling authority could easily stifle dissent by jailing or killing dissenters. But New York was a place that was governed by law. So it went to trial. Zenger was defended by none other than Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton argued if something was true, it couldn't be called libel. He won the case setting a precedent for the freedom of the press as a check on corrupt government.

Young points out that freedom of worship, separation of church and state, and freedom of the press were ideas *already in circulation* here *long before* the US Constitution was written.

Indeed, dissent began almost immediately, almost before the ink was dry on the Constitution. The struggle between federal power and state's rights has been in continuous dispute since the beginning. Abigail Adams agitated for the rights of women to be included in the original version of the Constitution. Slavery never felt settled with Northern dissent from the start as well.

Every war this country has fought has had its dissenters. The Loyalists wanted to remain as subjects to the Crown during the Revolutionary War. A good many didn't want the Civil War believing the issue of slavery could be resolved another way. There were resisters to the Second World War. The Unitarian minister in New York City John Haynes Holmes was against the war – a very unpopular position at the time.

The reason Henry David Thoreau went to jail was he didn't want to pay his poll tax as a protest against the Mexican American War. He was none too pleased when his aunt came down the next day and paid it for him. His essay on civil disobedience is one of the sacred texts of dissent. In it he wrote:

The mass of men serve the state ... not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables ... etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgement or of the moral sense ... Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt ... Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens.

Others – as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office holders—serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the devil, without intending it, as God.

A very few—as heroes, patriots, martyrs, and reformers in the great sense – serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it. (adapted by Young)

He also wrote:

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?

Under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison.

Another powerful dissenting voice raises concerns about who we are becoming as a nation as we became a colonial power that governs nations without representation in our democratic institutions. This anti-Imperialism movement was energized by the Spanish-American War. At the conclusion of that war the U.S. took over territory outside continental US in Guantanamo, Guam and the Philippines.

Republican Carl Schurz, who served as Secretary of the Interior in latter half of 19th Century, was critical of President McKinley for taking over the Philippines as a colony. He said:

If we [become an imperial power], we shall transform the government of the people, for the people, and by the people ... into a government of one part of the people, the strong, over another part, the weak... And I warn the American people that a democracy ... cannot long play king over subject populations without creating within itself ways of thinking and habits of action most dangerous to its own vitality.

I mention these two dissenters because they highlight our nation's ambivalent movement toward becoming an imperial power in the world. After World War Two, we were the defacto ruler of the planet for a time. The financial institutions that the Allies set up have run the world since then with the dollar as the world backup currency.

I'm haunted by the words of Schurz:

I warn the American people that a democracy ... cannot long play king over subject populations without creating within itself ways of thinking and habits of action most dangerous to its own vitality.

At Chautauqua each morning there is a Protestant worship service. The minister who gives these services in the large amphitheater in the center of the grounds begins their week with the Sunday

service. This year, for the week we attended, the minister was the Rev. Michael-Ray Mathews, senior American Baptist pastor, grassroots leader and community organizer. He serves as the Director of Clergy Organizing for Faith in Action (formerly PICO National Network).

He shared a question with us that he had been using in his clergy organizing work for the last five years. It is a very challenging question to anyone who works as part of a religious institution. I think it easily transfers to everyone else who doesn't serve as clergy too. The question is this:

Are you a Chaplain to the Empire or are you a Prophet of the Resistance? (repeat)

That question hit me hard. I love to hob nob with elected officials here in Albany. I offer pastoral support when they ask for it and I have the opportunity to respond. I learned in community organizing that I SHOULD develop personal relationships with people in power so I'd be able to influence them in the future when I had a justice issue to bring to them.

Yet because of those personal relationships, I am sometimes silent on issues of concern with them when I could speak out. I might not want to risk my relationship with elected leaders and let someone else be the prophet of the moment. A lot easier to click like, rather than take a stand, write a letter, or create a critical blog.

And sometimes it is confusing to figure out which side you are on. Rev. Mathews gave us some helpful guidance by describing what drives empires everywhere. He named three ways to recognize empire at work. Empires are about hierarchy, scarcity and isolation.

Hierarchy assumes an elite, small group, typically people with a lot of wealth, charisma, and power, are the ones who should be making the big decisions. The general population, especially the marginalized, need to be excluded. The concentration of power in the elite is empire's goal.

To recognize scarcity thinking, Mathews quoted from Lynne Twist's book, "Soul of Money:" There is not enough, I need more, and that is just the way it is." Capitalism, as it is practiced today is driven by the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Much of our current economic system moves us in that direction. And continuous growth means ever more extraction from the earth which compromises the planet's ability to sustain life itself.

Finally, isolation is the most frightening feature of empire in this present moment of trade wars and anti-immigrant sentiment around the world. Rather than seeing each other as resources to achieve a good and abundant life, Empire is afraid of those it exploits and sets up an us vs. them duality. It encourages the latent tribalism in our DNA that many religions, especially UU, seek to resist.

These are not the values that Unitarian Universalism celebrates and advocates. We value the inherent worth and dignity of all people. We want all the people of the world to have a good quality of life. A good quality of life that allows them to meet their needs and opens to them the opportunity to move toward their dreams and visions of a good life. Rather than participating in a win-lose economy, we want all people to be able to participate and be rewarded fairly for their contributions of labor and capital. I severely doubt it is good for our planet for us all eat steak every night but Unitarian Universalists can say with confidence every person deserves enough food for good health and survival. We all deserve to be sheltered from the elements and be able to cover and protect our bodies, get basic health care and sanitation.

Rather than hierarchy, scarcity, and isolation, our core values are democracy, equality, and world community with peace and justice for all.

I dearly wish people were reasonable and cared about their neighbor as much as themselves. That is not the reality we currently live in. Who knows, maybe we *will* evolve that way in the coming years but that isn't where we are now.

What matters greatly however is we can hold the vision that this is possible. Not likely soon or very probable in the future, but without someone holding that vision, it may perish. Let us dissent from cynicism and the toxic elements of our society. Let us refuse to believe that love must crumble before hate.

Our congregation is our ongoing experiment is bringing that vision of Beloved Community to life. May we keep developing our vision of Beloved Community, practice it in our lives and become examples to the world of what can happen when love truly guides us.

Benediction

You've heard me celebrating dissent today and I know there are more than a few here today who may feel a little awkward about it, are afraid they might not do it right, or worry that they might end up hurting or offending the very folks they want to help. Social justice scholar Edwin Lindo has some encouraging words for you: Don't be afraid of being a little clumsy as you work for justice and fairness in the world. Most of us would rather be clumsily moving the right direction than looking back later and seeing we didn't move at all.