

Democracy Is Not Easy  
(a two-part sermon series for MPUUC, by Paul K Davis)  
Part 1, June 10: Looking Inward  
Part 2, June 17: Looking Outward

I hold democracy sacred. It is our fifth Unitarian Universalist principle. But what is democracy, and how do we accomplish it? It is not static, but, as our principle says, it is a process. We use it in our congregation, and also in other voluntary organizations. We use it in our civil government. Thousands of years of experience indicates it is neither perfect nor easy, but we still don't know of anything better. In a two-part series I will draw from my experience and reading to discuss the process of democracy, both in voluntary organizations (looking inward, on June 10) and in our government (looking outward, on June 17). I will emphasize the need for procedure and compromise, the emptiness of democracy without positive values and goals, and the occasional need for civil disobedience.

Democracy Is Not Easy - 1. Looking Inward  
Sunday Service for Mission Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation; 2018 June 10  
Paul K Davis, Worship Leader; Sharon Davis, Worship Associate; Mark Kahn, Musician

## MESSAGE

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"Democracy is the worst form of government", said Winston Churchill. Why, you might ask, do we like democracy if it is "the worst form of government"? Well, it is embodied in our Unitarian Universalist values, which include, in the fifth principle, "the use of the democratic process in our congregations and in society at large". But this doesn't really answer the question - why were we so foolish as to put the worst form of government into our principles?

One answer is to finish the quotation from Winston Churchill. In full, he wrote, "Democracy is the worst form of government - except for all the others." In other words, democracy is difficult, but everything else is worse.

Because I hold democracy sacred, I am offering these two messages under the general caption, "Democracy is Not Easy". Today will be about democracy in voluntary organization, such as our congregation. Next Sunday will be about democracy in society at large.

In the multiple decades of my life I have accumulate quite a bit of experience with democracy, at both levels. I have had a tendency to join organizations. Then, when volunteers were requested, my hand had a mysterious tendency to float upward. When nominations for officers were being made, I failed to step backward as quickly as others.

In college I became President of the Association of non-fraternity-sorority students. When our daughter was in school I became President of the school district gifted student parents group. Then I served three terms as President of Stage 1 community theatre. When I worked at NASA, I helped organize scientists and engineers into a labor union and, yes, I became President of that union local. I also served one term as president of the council of all locals, within my international union, representing NASA employees nationwide. Now, at our Board meeting in July, I am destined to be elevated from President-Elect of this congregation to President.

As I look back over my experiences, I see many lessons. In most of these cases I stepped into situations which were more difficult than I expected, and learned more than I knew there was to learn. I'd like to share some of that with you.

I'll start with a very brief summary of lessons learned: procedure is important, but don't sweat the small stuff; compromise is essential, but always follow your values.

My prime example will be from my labor union. I was the second president of my union local after scientists and engineers had merged with the clerical staff union. I had considerable

respect for my predecessor, but not everyone else did. In particular, it had somehow happened that we had elected as chief steward someone who couldn't stand him, and wouldn't come to board meetings because he would be there. When the original president decided he'd had enough, I was one of four candidates for president, and a coworker I respected decided to run against the incumbent chief steward.

I returned from a multi-month assignment in DC to find that insufficient planning had occurred for the election, and I quickly drafted a procedure which was largely adopted and followed.

When the ballots were counted I had been elected president and the challenger had defeated the incumbent chief steward. I celebrated - briefly. Then I learned that the defeated chief steward had researched all the laws for union elections, discovered that we had violated several, and filed a complaint with the international union. After a few more days the international ordered us to do the election over again.

Then management's labor relations officer called me into his office and asked what was going on. It seems three different people had been coming to him filing grievances: the newly elected chief steward, the previous chief steward who claimed he was still in office because the election was invalid, and the deputy chief steward who claimed that because of the dispute he was in charge. Not only that, the defeated incumbent was claiming the newly elected chief steward was not a valid member of the union, so he had filed a grievance against her.

All this was happening because we had not followed proper procedure.

Fortunately, I had joined Mission Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation at about the same time, and I signed up for a meditation class with Rev. Chris Schriener. I also had my blood pressure checked, and was put on medication to keep it down. I reviewed my knowledge of Robert's Rules of Order and started reading about labor law. One weekend, during this turmoil, my wife dragged me off to Yosemite for a weekend, to remind me that there are greater things in the universe than the people I was struggling with during the week.

I also received some good news. I had thought the international union was requiring us to redo the elections for all the offices, including my own, but they were only requiring the chief steward election to be conducted over. This was not because it was the losing chief steward who had complained, but rather because that had been a close vote - only six votes difference. In comparison, I had received two thirds of the vote for president. The international union judged that our irregularities in procedure could have affected the close election, but were unlikely to have affected the other elections.

And there is my first lesson. Procedure can be very important, but don't sweat the small stuff. Democracy is not, in fact, a goal, but, as our fifth principle says, it is a process. Don't get worked up over failures that don't actually affect the result.

I also received some good news from management. They considered it was not their role to

get involved in the issue of who were legitimate members of the union, and they accepted my word, as the validly elected president, concerning who the other officers of the union were. Now I was only fighting a one-front war.

We set about re-running the chief steward election. We read all the accepted procedures carefully, instead of writing our own. We relied heavily on the legal staff of the international union to interpret laws and guide us.

As president, though, I was still in a bind. I strongly favored the challenger who had narrowly won the election, but I had to be strictly neutral in applying the procedures, or else we risked the re-run election also being declared invalid. Again, I found my membership in this congregation valuable. I came to Kidango, where we were then meeting, Sunday mornings, and read the seven principles, which were then printed on every order of service. I went back to work Monday mornings purposing to make my decisions based on principles, rather than bowing to the strongly worded demands of partisans.

Then another unexpected event occurred. Part of the required process was to allow each candidate a period of time to review the membership list, which was otherwise considered highly confidential. We arranged for this, following all of the guidance from the international union legal staff. But one of the candidates grabbed the list and ran. I had expected more errors in understanding the rules. I had expected ordinary failures to follow rules. I had not expected a planned purposeful violation of a rule. Furthermore, if I took any immediate action, that would again bias the election. For me, then, more meditation and contemplation of fundamental principles.

At last the day of the re-run election came. We counted the ballots with many eyes watching. This time the challenger, my preference, who had won the unfair election by just six votes, garnered over two thirds of the vote. I drew the unexpected conclusion that, while the first election had been unfair, it had not been biased against the individual who lost and protested, rather it had actually been biased in his favor, on account of his better recognition as the incumbent.

But, as our principles say, democracy is a process, not a goal. I and my associates still had much work to do.

First necessity was to protect the integrity of the process. We concluded we could not ignore the theft of the membership list. We brought charges before the international union to expel four members, including the previous chief steward who had just been defeated in the election. The four chose to resign their memberships, so there were no trials. Some time later, two of them applied for return to membership. Because we believed we had responded adequately, there was no objection to their return.

I now found myself president with a mixed executive board. I convinced my partisans that, while being watchful of others, we should not let that interfere with cooperation in the accomplishment of the union's function.

Another concern of mine was that I knew the very candidate I had favored, who was now our chief steward, was an ardent bible-studying Baptist, while we were expecting to be bringing grievances on behalf of gay and lesbian members who were denied equal benefits. Again, I found my grounding here in Unitarian Universalism valuable. We respect all sources of wisdom. I had, in fact, been refreshing my own knowledge of the Bible in classes offered by Rev. Barbara Meyers. I had concluded that the Bible does not really condemn homosexuality as a general sin, but only rape and forced prostitution, whether hetero- or homo-sexual. I found occasions to mention my various beliefs, without trying to induce anyone to agree. When the time came, our new chief steward enthusiastically and persistently defended gay rights.

We also set about the tedious process of fixing problems in our bylaws and procedures. It is a burden to write procedures. It is difficult to write solid procedures. Procedures are a drag when you try to follow all the details. But they are the only way democracy can fairly and successfully function. We will never succeed in following all procedures, especially in meeting all deadlines, but doing our best, even if imperfect, is still the best.

Despite the tribulations I have just summarized, and more that I certainly don't have time to mention, I was also blessed. My associates were an earnest group who genuinely wanted to accomplish good things for their fellow employees and for our agency. It was worth it to get through the problems, so we could focus on our mission.

I also promised to talk about compromise, which is just as essential to democracy as voting. I'll draw an example of compromise from a different organization. Knuti and I are both on the board of an archeological society, one of whose prime activities is organizing tours. It became apparent that the organization needed an explicit policy for these tours, to cover liability issue, cost sharing, etc. In the discussion, some board members became locked into specific wordings. One quit the board in protest. We held a marathon board session to work through the issues. Knuti and I were among those working on compromise wordings. We eventually agreed, and the policy has now been working well. But it impressed me, during the discussion, how difficult it was to separate principles from implementation. People felt they were standing on principles in insisting that the policy use certain terminology, or avoid certain terminology. It was by focusing on the purpose, and then choosing the least confusing words to express it, that we finally agreed.

I'll conclude by restating my very brief summary of lessons learned: procedure is important but don't sweat the small stuff; compromise is essential but always follow your values.

Next week I will focus on these same issues in society at large. Thank you.

Democracy Is Not Easy - 2. Looking Outward  
Sunday Service for Mission Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation; 2018 June 17  
Paul K Davis, Worship Leader; Kathy Wallcave, Worship Associate; Peak Rocks, Music

### MESSAGE

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According to the Devil's Dictionary, by Ambrose Bierce, there are two fundamental forms of government: autocracies, which are governed by one person, and democracies, which are governed by chance. Yet our fifth Unitarian Universalist value calls for the use of the democratic process.

This is the second of my two-sermon series on democracy. Last week I focused on democracy in voluntary organizations, such as my labor union, the archeological society I belong to, and, implicitly, this congregation. Today I will focus on democracy in society at large, especially in the United States government.

Of the large number of issues in regard to democracy, I will concentrate on two: voting rights and public education. And I will offer a response to Ambrose Bierce.

I first encountered voting rights issues in 1964 when I was a student at Butler University, in Indianapolis, Indiana, where I had lived since I was eight. I was amazed at what was going on. The Indianapolis Star newspaper was reporting on plans under which, in central Indianapolis, whose population was largely Black, voters would be told to go home if they were in line when the polls closed, despite the law, and that there would be other strenuous efforts to discourage voters. This was unofficial, but apparently well organized. The organizers seemed to have no problems with their plans being published. Other parts of the plan included mailing empty envelopes to voters, and, if they were returned, assuming they had moved and were no longer eligible to vote, and photographing people as they waited to vote, warning them that they could be prosecuted if there was any irregularity.

Now, let me tell you a little about the racial culture in Indianapolis, Indiana, and the Mid-West, as we were taught to call the states from Ohio to Illinois and from Kentucky to Wisconsin. They were proud they were not the South. The South had practiced slavery, and then they had enacted segregation laws. We were the good North. But still, many home deeds had covenants preventing sale of the property to Negroes or Jews. We didn't have legally segregated schools, but the attendance boundaries pretty much matched the residential areas, with the primary Black high school being named Crispus Attucks, after an African-American hero of the U.S. war of independence. And now, despite the fact that we were proud we allowed people to vote without regard for race, all these draconian efforts to prevent supposedly wrongful voting were being conducted only in the Black area of town.

Opportunity knocked for me. College students were being recruited to be poll watchers, to help ensure that voters would not be intimidated, and would exercise their right. I volunteered.

On election day I went to my assigned precinct, and mostly just stood there. The regular precinct leadership made sure their voters voted early, and, though cameras were flashing in their faces, and challenges were being made based on empty envelopes, they were not intimidated.

I went home feeling I had done a good thing, though not an especially great thing. Most notably, I had seen first hand what was going on. Ever since, I have known that so-called voter integrity laws are intended to be enforced unequally. This was recently confirmed when the courts found that the North Carolina voter integrity act had been written to allow forms of identification that were more common among White citizens, and excludes some that were more common among Black citizens.

I have sometimes wondered why, by the age of eighteen, I had chosen sides, and was there to say, "yes, you do have a right to vote", rather than to flash a camera in the face of African-American citizens.

Part of my motivation was the evident hypocrisy on the other side of the issue. Part of it was my understanding, from church and Sunday school, of Jesus's message. I had especially taken to heart the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and felt Jesus was speaking to my own time and place, with 'Samaritan' encompassing African-Americans and all who were regarded as beneath one's own kind.

I had also been influenced by civics classes in school. I had taken to heart, "all men are created equal, and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights." I was aware that "man" could be interpreted either to mean just male humans, or all humans. I was not yet aware that some people had succeeded in interpreting it to exclude humans of African ancestry.

In other words, I had been developing my values. And I see here the response to Ambrose Bierce. Democracy is a process. Unless the voters have and apply values, a democracy will indeed be governed by chance. With values, democracy becomes a process which fulfills values. Unitarian Universalism has now provided a succinct way of expressing many of my values. It is our belief in "the inherent worth and dignity of every person" and "justice, equity and compassion in human relations", especially, that lead to our support of voting rights in "the use of the democratic process within ... society at large."

Despite Thomas Jefferson's bold words in the declaration, the United States has been much slower in developing and implementing values. Voting rights grew slowly. Originally rights were by state; the only national guarantee was that there could be no religious test for holding office. By and large only adult White male citizens with sufficient property could vote. The age of adulthood was not consistent. Only four states allowed freed slaves to vote. After the civil war, in 1865, slavery was abolished. Citizenship and voting now began to shift toward being national issues. In 1868, citizenship was extended to everyone born in the United States. Only in 1870, though, were voting rights granted regardless of "race, color or previous condition of servitude", and this was unevenly enforced. It was not until 1920 that the vote was guaranteed to women. In 1924 Native Americans were guaranteed the right to vote. It seems

the 15th amendment, by itself, was not sufficient; but it was also necessary for Congress to adopt a law implementing it. In 1971 we finally agreed that everyone of least eighteen years age was an adult, and had the right to vote.

Meanwhile many states were dragging their feet. One method of restricting voting was a poll tax, which again put an economic condition on voting. This was constitutionally abolished in 1964. It was also again recognized that the 15th amendment did not enforce itself, an implementing law was needed. This was enacted in 1965, and the cover of our Order of Service shows the signing ceremony for that bill.

One foot-dragging measure that was difficult to deal with was literacy tests. There is some rational argument for this, in that a person should be able to learn who they are voting for or against, and have some understanding of issues. However, in fact, they had a different purpose, which was accomplished various ways. A common provision was a so-called 'grandfather clause', which said that if your grandfather was eligible to vote, you did not need to take the literacy test. There were other informal methods of differential application of the test, so that it was a very effective way of disenfranchising most Black voters, as well as a great many poor White voters. After much legislation and several Supreme Court cases, literacy tests were finally abolished in 1970.

Besides, the true solution to the literate voter issue is good universal education. This is why I am especially concerned with current attacks on our educational system. Educational institutions should not be reduced to opportunities for entrepreneurs to make profits, and the funding of public education must not depend on the wealth of the local area. As I see it, this is essential to the realization of all seven of our U-U principles.

Now, before I conclude, I wish to tell you something I learned during my preparation of this sermon. I have told you of my participation in the 1964 election as a polling place observer. I have long been proud of this, but considered it just one very small action. One result of that election was sending Andy Jacobs Jr. to Congress, from the district in which I had volunteered. In researching the Voting Rights Act of 1965, I found that Andy was one of its co-authors. So, I can claim that I was a small part of the cause of the picture on the cover of our Order of Service. As Unitarian Minister Edward Everett Hale wrote, "I am only one, But still I am one; I cannot do everything, But still I can do something; And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."

Let us do the somethings which we can do. Let us continue to affirm and promote our Unitarian Universalist principles. In so doing, let us defend the rights of others to vote and to receive a decent education.

Thank you.



Reference:

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