

## **Democratic Process: A Conversation**

Unitarian Universalists have historically ascribed to principles that include “...(T)he right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” (The Fifth Principle)

In three workshops this past winter, we explored what we mean by democracy, democratic processes and the role of individual conscience in society. The political rhetoric leading up to the November 2024 elections about threats to American democracy was alarming and inspired us to take a closer look at our commitment to democratic processes. This report from our workshops is in three installments and includes discussion handouts and exercises. Watch for the next two installments as we prepare to look at our Fifth Principle on Sunday Morning, November 23.

We want to share with you something of our conversations and perspectives from the workshops last winter. Our goal is to continue building on these conversations as we face the challenges ahead to reinvent and rebuild our communities and the nation.



### **The Joy of Participation!**

**Photo from the 2023 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association**

#### **Part 1. What democracy means to me...**

Our first gathering at the Grange last winter to discuss and explore our Fifth Principle began with a panel presentation that focused on the origins and our current experience of American political democracy.

- **Reverend Barbara Prose** provided a historical perspective from the New England experience growing from Puritan roots. From these theocratic beginnings, the Congregationalist Church in Salem, Massachusetts first declared a principle known as “congregational polity” that provided a democratic form of church governance. Unitarianism draws directly from this tradition which rejects institutional authoritarianism. And these principles of democratic governance by an assembly informed the development of American legislative bodies. Rev. Barbara’s flip chart illustration (see below) depicts the evolution of spiritual and religious authority over the last four centuries roughly along the following stages:
  - primary authority first resting in the institutional leadership of the church which interpreted the ‘holy book’ and governed the moral and spiritual life of the individual
  - primary authority resting in biblical text (now accessible to a literate population) and guiding how the individual participates in church and community
  - Primary authority residing in individual conscience supported in community informed by teachings (biblical and/or otherwise)

**Christy Deere** provided a perspective from a ‘green card’ Canadian who did not have a history of political involvement in Canada, but upon recently taking up residence in the U.S., became immersed in local politics as the campaign manager for a candidate running for office in Klickitat County. The campaign featured reaching ‘across the aisle’ and articulating common ground values and concerns; the progressive candidate did better than many expected and came close to an upset.

**Paul Blackburn**, Mayor of Hood River, is one of our own members (and currently serves as President of the Fellowship). Paul provided us a perspective from an elected official who is sometimes put on the ‘hot seat’ but tasked with representing the whole community. Responsible governance will take leaders outside the comfort zone.

Following these introductions and perspectives we reviewed a series of quotations about democratic government including some by Unitarians and Universalists.

### **...fraud, violence, cruelty....**

Four United States Presidents were Unitarians. We UUs readily claim John Adams and John Quincy Adams as our own; we are perhaps a little less enthusiastic about Millard Fillmore and William Howard Taft.

In a letter to his wife Abigail - less than 2 weeks after the Declaration of Independence was announced in July of 1776 - John Adams wrote:

*“Democracy ... never can be so durable as aristocracy or monarchy; but while it lasts, it is more bloody than either ...democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.... It is in vain to say that democracy is less vain, less proud, less selfish, less ambitious or less*

*avaricious than aristocracy or monarchy. Those passions are the same in all men...and when unchecked, produce the same effects of fraud, violence and cruelty...."*  
(emphasis added)

We shared a series of **quotations about democracy** (most were more optimistic than Adam's observation, see below) before turning to two exercises:

**The first exercise** involved looking at a personal timeline of involvement with democratic processes. We looked at our earliest memories including activities such as classroom debates and elections, watching parents and adults discuss candidates and go to the polls, and simply taking turns in group discussions. Highlights along the timeline included registering to vote, campaigning door to door, writing letters to elected officials, paying taxes, and organizing advocacy efforts to affect policies and programs. Personal experience was documented above the timeline; below the timeline we noted events going on nationally and globally at the same time. You may be interested in doing this exercise yourself on the timeline template, below.

**The second exercise** was to write a statement about 'what democracy means to me' in 100 words or less. We suggested that - in composing these statements - we might imagine them as brief letters to the editor or concise posts on social media. What would you include in **your** statement?

During our first workshop we broke into small groups to share elements of our timelines and to discuss what democracy means to us personally. In reporting back to the whole gathering we identified many aspects democratic process including: free speech, education, freedom of belief, access to information, meaningful opportunities to be heard, etc. Discussion included recognition of how these aspects of individual conscience and democratic participation are reflected in many other Unitarian Universalist principles and values. We've included the list below of seven values traditionally common to UUs as well as the new logo of the Unitarian Universalist Association articulating "Love at the Center". What do you think?

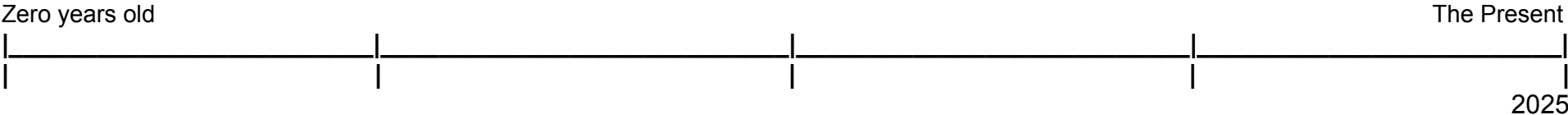
Our discussion of UU values spilled over into our second workshop when we explored the "guardrails" that preserve and promote the benefits of the democratic process. Watch for Part 2 of our discussion of the UU 5th Principle.

**The following attachments are:**

- 1. Personal Outline - Template**
- 2. “What Democracy Means to Me” - Template**
- 3. Flip Chart - Evolution of Spiritual & Religious Authority**
- 4. Quotations About Democracy**
- 5. 7 UU Principles - Values with Love at the Center**

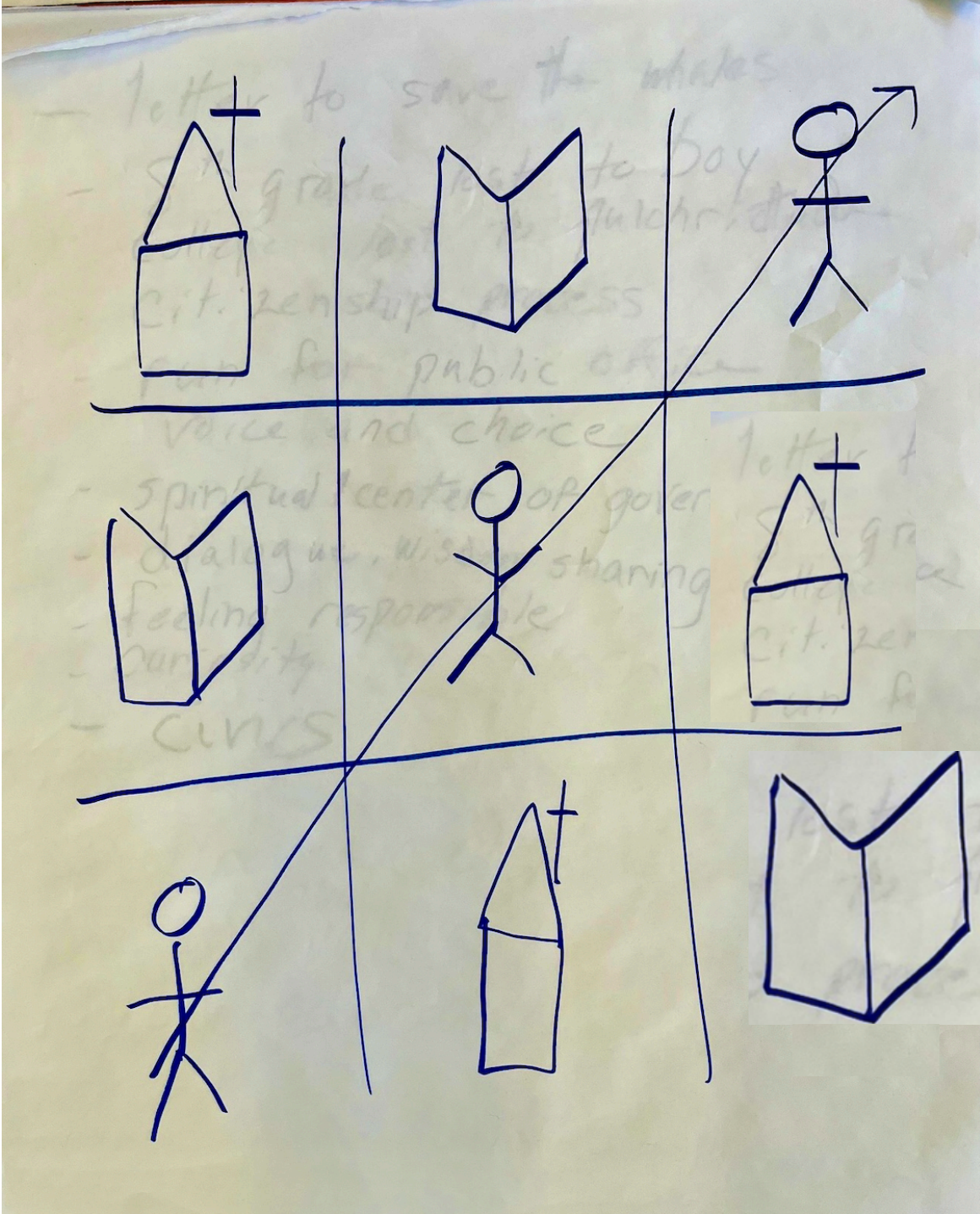
**TIMELINE: DEMOCRATIC PROCESS**

**Your personal encounters with  
democratic processes  
Highlights**



**Events happening  
In the wider world**





## **Selected quotes about democracy and the democratic process**

“Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide. It is in vain to say that democracy is less vain, less proud, less selfish, less ambitious, or less avaricious than aristocracy or monarchy. It is not true, in fact, and nowhere appears in history.”

—John Adams, President and Unitarian, July 1776 letter to Abigail

“A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

—James Madison, President, baptized Anglican but aligned with Unitarianism, 1788

“If there have been those who doubted whether a confederated representative democracy were a government competent to the wise and orderly management of the common concerns of a mighty nation, those doubts have been dispelled....”

—John Quincy Adams, President and Unitarian, inaugural address 1825

“Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small; Americans use associations to give fêtes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries ... ; in this manner they create hospitals, prisons, schools. Finally, if it is a question of bringing to light a truth or developing a sentiment with the support of a great example, they associate. Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States.

“In America I encountered sorts of associations of which, I confess, I had no idea, and I often admired the infinite art with which the inhabitants of the United States managed to fix a common goal to the efforts of many men and to get them to advance to it freely.”

—Alexis deTocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

“While democracy must have its organizations and controls, its vital breath is individual liberty”

—Charles Evans Hughes, Chief Justice, Republican and also President of the Northern Baptist Convention

“The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure it is right....”

—Learned Hand, Judge and agnostic/skeptic 1944

“Democracy means not ‘I’m as good as you are,’ but ‘You’re as good as I am.’”  
—Theodore Parker, Unitarian Minister and abolitionist, mid-1800s

“The capacity to combine commitment with skepticism is essential to democracy.”  
—Mary Catherine Bateson, writer and anthropologist (daughter of Margaret Mead)

“Civility is not a tactic or a sentiment. It is the determined choice of trust over cynicism, of community over chaos. And this commitment, if we keep it, is a way to shared accomplishment.”  
—George W. Bush, President and Episcopalian, 2001 Inaugural Address

“The experience of democracy is like the experience of life itself—always changing, infinite in its variety, sometimes turbulent and all the more valuable for having been tested by adversity.”  
—Jimmy Carter, President and Baptist

“Democracy is a small hard core of common agreement, surrounded by a rich variety of individual differences.”

—James B. Conant, chemist, President of Harvard University and Unitarian, supported the Manhattan Project and the development of the atomic bomb

“Every democratic system evolves its own conventions. It is not only the water but the banks which make the river.”  
—Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India and Hindu, published 1975

“Democracy! Bah! When I hear that word I reach for my feather boa!”  
—Allen Ginsburg, from the poet’s journals (50s and 60s) published 1977

“The stakes... are too high for government to be a spectator sport.”  
—Barbara Jordan, US Representative and Missionary Baptist, 1992

“Democracy means not ‘I’m as good as you are,’ but ‘You’re as good as I am.’”  
—Theodore Parker, Unitarian Minister and abolitionist, mid-1800s

“We are a democracy, and there is only one way to get a democracy on its feet in the matter of its individual, its social, its municipal, its State, its national conduct, and that is by keeping the public informed about what is going on.”  
—Joseph Pulitzer, publisher

“Active citizens...are public meeting-goers and joiners of voluntary organizations who discuss and deliberate with others about the policies that will affect them all, and who serve their country not only as taxpayers and occasional soldiers, but by having a considered notion of the public good that they genuinely take to heart. The good citizen is a patriot.”  
—Judith N. Shklar philosopher and political theorist, 1991

For many Unitarian Universalism, there are seven Principles which reflect deeply-held values and serve as a moral guide. These seven Principles are as follows:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Nosotros, las congregaciones miembros de la Asociación Unitaria Universalista, convenimos en afirmar y fomentar:

- El valor y la dignidad propia de cada persona;
- La justicia, equidad y compasión en las relaciones humanas;
- La aceptación del uno al otro y el estímulo al crecimiento espiritual en nuestras congregaciones;
- Una búsqueda libre y responsable por la verdad y el sentido;
- El derecho de la conciencia y el uso del proceso democrático dentro de nuestras congregaciones y en la sociedad en general;
- La meta de una comunidad mundial con paz, libertad y justicia para todos;
- El respeto por el tejido interdependiente de todo lo existente, del cual somos una parte.

