

The People's Wisdom and Will

October 10, 2004

The Reverend Terence H. Ellen
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, Maryland

READING: from The Rev. A. Powell Davies' America's Real Democracy, pp. 3, 77-81.

. . . General Eisenhower, on the day that he became President of Columbia University, answered a reporter's question concerning his religion in the following words:

"I am the most intensely religious man I know. Nobody goes through six years of war without faith. That doesn't mean that I adhere to any sect. A democracy cannot exist without a religious base. I believe in democracy." . . .

Democracy, we said, is the social and political expression of the religious principle that all men are brothers and mankind a family; and at this higher level, the spiritual unity of the human family is declared to be unrestricted by nation, race, or creed.

This is the principle upon which the United States was founded. General Eisenhower, when he made his impromptu affirmation of belief, was merely declaring his adherence to the faith of the Founding Fathers: a faith which, as we have now seen, has been held by a numerous company of great Americans, including—without exception—the greatest . . .

. . . What is needed is a clearer recognition that the religion upon which democracy is founded seeks to identify in *all* religions—Catholic or Protestant, Christian, Jewish and all others—the qualities which are *not* cultist: the spiritual and ethical qualities which are the same wherever they are found. It is the increase of these qualities, not submission to religious institutions or their creeds, which is responsible for the progress recorded in American history—as we have seen in the foregoing pages, with their long list of representative Americans influential in every department of our national life. In adhering to the more inclusive faith, they did not reject what they had found good in Christianity, or in any other province of religious culture. They sifted the true from the false, the more necessary from the less essential. And instead of taking creeds as being the test of true religion, they thought of experience and insight, justice and compassion, righteousness and service to mankind as being the final test. In other words, they agreed with Jesus that "by their fruits ye shall know them."

The decisive emergence of this higher level of religion came, as we saw, after many centuries of hope and prophecy, precisely when the new nation was being founded. That is how it happened that the Fathers held this faith. They represented a transition point of history: a time when it was possible to adopt a new faith and by the power of it establish a new society, conceived as Lincoln later put it, "in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

To a fuller extent than ever before, and with a significance the full import of which only the future could unfold, the ancient conflict in religion was being resolved. A society was being built, not on fear and on the servitude that fear requires; but on freedom and brotherhood, and on the yearning for a larger, fuller life.

This is what was meant when it was written that all men are endowed by their Creator with the same inalienable rights: the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It was what was meant when Jefferson swore on the altar of God, "eternal hostility to every form of tyranny over the mind of man." And it was what he meant when he said that he accepted the moral teachings of Jesus but not the miracles or creeds. It is also what Lincoln meant when he said much the same thing, adding that the true significance of Jesus was "a spirit in the life." For that is what the moral teachings of Jesus had pointed to: the brotherhood of free men freely following the higher

law of conscience as it was revealed to them by the spirit of God within them.

No lesser faith can possibly unite the world, or even maintain the unity of the American people themselves. No sectarian faith can do it. It is useless, as well as being evidence of spiritual pride and a sort of Christian imperialism, to pretend that the world will all become ecclesiastically Christian, or that America will.

. . . There must be no question about the basic faith. The real conflict of the modern world is between the brotherhood of free men and the institutions of servitude. It is equally between religion that liberates and dogma, both ecclesiastical and political, that enslaves.

Meanwhile, as we have seen, American history in all its fields— statesmanship, literature, science, social reform—has been shaped by liberators. They were liberators who rejected authoritarian religion because they saw that the churches claimed to know what they did not know. The churches claimed to know who were faithful, not to creeds and institutions, but to the truth that affirmed itself in their own spiritual experience and followed from their own high moral insights.

It is this tradition that we must continue: it is this that we must restore and carry to a full and final victory.

SERMON

In the cemetery of the small town of New Lebanon, New York, up on the New York/Massachusetts border, is a large sarcophagus-like rectangular block of granite with large letters on the side saying “I STILL TRUST THE PEOPLE.” The grave belongs to Samuel J. Tilden, a local New Lebanon boy, who went on to become Governor of New York and then one of the several people to win the popular vote for the United States Presidency but lose the election in the electoral college. I stumbled onto that inscription when I was living in New Lebanon, and I think the tone of those few words on the side of the grave contains both a ringing endorsement of democracy and a sense of great personal disappointment, perhaps even bitterness at the ironic loss. I surely cannot blame the man for having some strong feelings on the matter. But if I meditate on that brief saying, as I know Samuel Tilden wanted me to do when he had them put there, I find them the essence of the belief that underlies the long, long struggle to establish democratic process upon the face of this earth. And I leave the word “still” in there, not just “I trust the people,” but rather “I **still** trust the people.” Because anyone who believes in democratic process will have to survive colossal blunders and misjudgements, as well as the intentional subverting of the democratic process that I think Tilden was referring to. And as we all know, there are lots of ways to subvert the process. So any believer in democracy had better have an abiding patience. You need that kind of grit implicit in Winston Churchill’s famous observation that democracy is the worst form of government on the earth—until you consider all the other alternatives. You need that kind of persistence that African Americans had to have when they woke up each morning with minds stayed on freedom, or the South Africans had through those long, long years of repression.

Now as far as I know, we are the only religious movement that has an affirmation of democratic process in our set of religious principles. You remember, it’s there at the beginning of our hymn book where we covenant together to affirm and promote “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” You newcomers may not know that that statement, along with the rest of our Purposes and Principles, was arrived at after long, long democratic process (or at least as close as we could come with the numbers involved). But lots of discussion, revisioning, feedback, input within and from our congregations went into it. Anyone who wanted to had a say in our process. And in an instance of good democratic process, this time the people got it right, for it is no accident that both the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process come in the same principle. Nor is it an accident that we promote and affirm democratic process first in our congregations and then in society at large. Of course this order is certainly because we want to practice what we preach, to hold hypocrisy at bay, but it is also more than that. Let me

explain.

Where does democratic process come from? Where did it arise? Athens? Yes, do a degree, but the founders of this republic knew that only a very small, elite segment of the Athenian population voted or had a say in the affairs of state. Magna Carta? The nobles whittled the king down a few major pegs, mostly to their own advantage. It is our own theologian James Luther Adams who to my knowledge most succinctly explains how it was in the church communities over on the left (most free) wing of the Protestant Reformation that democratic process was worked out, at least in what we take as Western culture. And we are part of that free church tradition. (I'm afraid my knowledge is too limited outside of this Eurocentric framework to talk about other democratic origins.) It was in those faith communities, gathered earnestly, devoutly around the search for religious truth, with everyone tired beyond tears of having others tell them what they must believe, that democratic process was born, refined, made real. And if it could work in matters of religion, of the salvation of the soul, then it could work in civil society and needed to be practiced there, too. And it did work in the gathered religious communities.

But this practice, in both the religious and civil sphere, was in turn based on an underlying principle, the first part of our fifth affirmation—the right of conscience. Affirming that principle clearly and unambiguously in 1817 up in Baltimore is what got William Ellery Channing and all who agreed with him thrown out of the orthodox standing order of Christian churches. Channing affirmed the individual conscience as the ultimate religious authority over scripture and over tradition because he knew that both scripture and tradition were born out of other people's consciences, just like ours. We could learn from them, even revere them, but truth to be real must be present, and that is where our own consciences dwell supreme. Not consciences like some little nitpicking, nay-saying, finger-shaking figure yelling "Don't do that!", but conscience as the indwelling of God within us. Conscience as the place where all of our best understanding and best wisdom reside. Conscience where our heart and mind are in accord, where today we might say the whole cosmos is manifest in our being. Conscience as the place of purity within us, calling us to do the right thing because we know it is the right thing. Conscience as the place of peace within us, or the guide leading us to that place. Conscience as the place that can see when the emperor indeed has no clothes and also that can see when we ourselves need some change. This, said Channing, is our final, and best, religious authority. And that is why, when any kind of truth is on the line, civil or religious, we ask each individual conscience to reflect and speak, for there is no greater power upon the face of the earth than honest conscience in conversation.

Now James Luther Adams may have overstated the case for democracy based on this evaluation of individual conscience coming out of the free church tradition (there are lots of chickens and eggs running around between the religious, philosophical, and political currents of our past), but he was absolutely on target when he affirmed how central our religious tradition is with the practice of democracy. And it is A. Powell Davies, more than any other person I know, who so clearly articulated that it is this belief in the right of conscience, and so in the worth and dignity of each individual, that is the genius, the hope, the strength, of this nation. Davies from his pulpit at All Souls Church here in D.C., and in his books America's Real Religion, American Destiny, etc.(they are in our library—check them out), during World War II and after, reminded us powerfully that this nation was not founded to be a Christian nation, at least in any dogmatic, authoritarian form, as Falwell and others would try to have us believe these days. Yes, there were Cotton Mathers and Jonathan Edwards, but the enduring greatness of this nation was created not by authoritarians of either the religious or civil type, but rather by all those who saw in the openness and universal dignity of democracy the great human chance for sanity, and for justice, and for hope. Davies, like the founders, knew that this effort was and is a work in progress, but the broad outlines of a wider and wider inclusiveness, and hence of a greater gathered wisdom, is clear. In the freeing of the slaves, the enfranchisement of African Americans and women, the direct election of Senators instead of their election by state legislatures, the elimination of property requirements for voting—the direction, the expansion, has been clear. The best of our nation's history has been an extension of democratic process to include more and more people. Abraham Lincoln put it thus (#586 in the back of the hymnal):

“As labor is the common burden of our race, so the effort of some to shift their share of the burden onto the shoulders of others is the great, durable, curse of the race. As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Our reliance is in our love for liberty; our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all people in all lands everywhere. . . . Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world?”

And it was Davies who reminded us that by and large the great figures in our national history who moved democratic process forward were those who adhered to this underlying faith in the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people, outside all dogmatic, sectarian boundaries. And those were usually the religious liberals, such as, in the days of our founding, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Tom Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Ethan Allen, Benjamin Rush, James Madison, George Mason, and on. Our forebears strove to stay clear of authoritarians or, later, fascists, of the left or the right. They, like Eisenhower, believed in democracy and made this country a beacon of hope to the world.

We have also, of course, systematically betrayed that hope time and time again, both within our borders and abroad. So we have to temper our justifiable pride with some equally justifiable humility and self-evaluation. But Davies was right when he said in the reading this morning that the founding of our nation coincided with a robust emergence of this faith in democracy that inspired our founders and enabled them to take the great strides they could, in the face of much opposition, to establish a democracy on the face of this earth. And it is those who have been true to this vision who have kept it great since. This, he claims, is America’s real religion; the open, free religious quest that respects the non-doctrinaire in all traditions, where, as Pat Humphries put it in or song before, respect for all our differences enhances our common ties. This, Davies said, is the real battle, the one between superstition and fear and their attendant subjugation, on one side, and freedom and unrestricted brotherhood and sisterhood on the other.

Our founders lifted up this vision at our nation’s inception. Davies proclaimed it clearly and eloquently in the face of the religious and civil oppressions of his time. What of us? What of these times?

I have major concerns for democratic process today. The first is the increasing secrecy of the government. The eviscerating of the *Freedom of Information Act* by stalling reporters, outright refusing them access, the sealing of presidential records as if they were private property and not the property of the people. All these concern me, for the only way a democratic people can control their own government is if they know what it is doing. That access to information is essential, and there are so many temptations of power to seal the people out.

My second concern also involves access to information, for the increasing concentration of the mass media is homogenizing and limiting the variety of information and opinions to which we have access. Yes, there is a burgeoning web media, but the dominant sources of information for us citizens are, I believe, more concentrated than at any time in memory. I know I find myself going to comedians like Jon Stewart and Bill Maher to get sane perspectives on what is happening. I don’t know many people commenting these days on the vitality of the free press in America. And if the people don’t even know, then they will never be able have a wise will.

Of course my third concern is known to us all, too - the lack of voter turnout in our country. To the extent this is just the apathy of taking something for granted, I’m not sure much can be done except reminding us all how hard-won this simple act is. But to the extent it stems from alienation from the whole political process, from seeing no one speaking the real concerns of the people, or to the extent it reflects a despair that anyone elected will actually do anything for the sake of those without a lot of power, then I think this is a grave issue that must be addressed. Addressed as a national priority.

My fourth concern is for the manipulation of the actual voting process. I mean more than incompetence here. I mean swaying the vote by putting the worst machines in the poorest areas, the false disenfranchising of the many

people such as was discovered in Florida last election. I know many security people have real concerns about the lack of protection of the votes on the new computer voting systems. Maryland Senator Barbara Mikulsky could not get the machine to register her vote correctly when she tried one out. Jimmy Carter has said what many have been finding, that Florida is no more prepared for fair elections this time than last. And that is a real shame, not only on that state, but on us all. And we all know Florida is not alone.

My fifth concern likewise involves manipulation, but this time in the increasingly sophisticated marketing techniques involved in the political advertizing. Call me a Luddite, but I object to using the studies of clinical psychology to persuade people to buy things, let alone to vote for a candidate. I know much of this probably cannot be avoided, but we can have a lot more of face to face debates like the Lincoln-Douglass ones, or the ones on T.V. recently, scripted as they were, and a lot less of these pathetic ads. Can't we demand that once again part of media programming be free public service programming, so that we can again have debates and presentations of the issues before us without politicians having to raise more money from special interests to buy paid time? To me that's a no-brainer.

Sixth, the power of the huge new concentrations of money on the political process has placed our whole democratic tradition in danger. It is time for publicly paid campaigns to open up the process and level the playing field and eliminate the corrupting influence of big money. I understand that sixty percent of the legislators in Maine have been elected on publicly financed campaigns so that they have no quid pro quo, implicit or explicit, to big campaign contributors. We need a lot more of that.

And seventh, I worry that the huge amount of power accruing to the President of the United States has escalated all the temptations that Lord Acton spoke of in his warning about power corrupting. Many insiders coming out of recent administrations have spoken of the increasing isolation of the President and of the arrogance that so easily comes with the huge power gathered around him. Any democratic people need to pay close attention to this.

These issues seem to me to be the main threats to democratic process we face today. I encourage you this election year to do something more than simply voting yourself to enhance the vitality of our democratic process. It is not enough to just register your own say-so. Democracy needs our help, and there are things for all of us to do. I wonder for instance if our own Angie Skinner out at Wilson Health Care Center at Asbury Park has an absentee ballot or a way to get to the polls. Things like that. You can go to www.UUA.org and look at the voting initiative that President Sinkford has instituted. There are lots of ideas and practical ideas there. Or you can go to the website of our local UU cooperative justice-making venture, Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice, www.uusj.org, and scroll over to the forums section and check out the voter mobilization ideas from our sister congregations. Our Washington Office likewise has all sorts of information. True Vote Maryland is looking for volunteers to monitor difficulties with the first usage of touch-screen machines here. You can call your party headquarters to volunteer with phoning, rides, whatever. Nowadays they can give you lists of people to call from your own home. The important thing, friends, is to help along this great, great process so central to our free religious, and our free civic, tradition. If we are to rise, we must do it all together.

I, like Tilden, still trust the people.

