

Democracy? Where?  
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As you know, we provide some modest publicity for upcoming services, with information in the prior week's order of service, sent out by email, on the UUG website and Facebook page. And from time to time some of you will send our sermon titles and blurbs out further, using Facebook and Twitter and possibly even in-person conversations. Occasionally, as a result, I receive some comments or suggestions while I'm preparing for the Sunday service, which can be helpful – or not.

So as a prelude to today's sermon I thought I would share with you four letters that I've received in the last couple of weeks, letters from four different perspectives.

1. Don't Go There

Dear Dave,

“Democracy? Where?” That sounds like a political sermon or a public policy sermon or a political science lecture. My advice: Try something else. We've got enough pundits. Intelligent churchgoers will stay away from preachers who are Sunday morning talk show wannabes. We've got the New York Times and NPR and PBS and on and on. We don't need you to tell us who to vote for or to analyze the ills of our political system.

Look. What's Unitarian Universalism all about, at its core? It's not politics. It's not competing visions of the good society or of how to get there. Here it is, two simple points.

First, Jesus wasn't God; Jesus isn't God. UUs have a lot of ideas about God – many of them quite confused or incoherent, if you ask me – but one thing we can all agree on – God help us if we can't – is that a man – or a woman – a human being – cannot be God. Jesus was a man. (Let's assume that there actually was such a person.) Ergo, Jesus is not God. Q.E.D.

Second, there is no hell. No hellfire and brimstone, no eternal damnation. No temporary damnation either, for that matter. How do we reach that conclusion?

The Universalists would say, a loving God wouldn't do that. And a nonloving God – or, more specifically, a spiteful, vengeful, evil God – is unimaginable.

The Unitarians would say there was no original sin. Whatever bad things our ancestors did, it's not our fault. And whatever anyone did, it couldn't justify eternal punishment.

And many Unitarian Universalists would say, when you die you're dead. Our reward is a dreamless sleep. If we experience hell, it's during our lives. Or hell is the world we're leaving to our children and grandchildren, but let's not go there right now.

So what does any of this have to do with democracy? you might ask. Well, nothing.

OK, we have our so-called UU principles, from inherent worth and dignity through the interdependent web of existence. They surely have social policy, social justice implications, that's what you're planning to preach, isn't it, Dave?

But you've got a problem there, two problems. First, what makes these principles – justice, equity, compassion, acceptance, spirituality, conscience, democracy, peace, liberty, justice a second time, and respect – what makes them UU? What reasonable, right-thinking person would reject them? Couldn't a Methodist claim them, with equal justification? Or an atheist?

Secondly, how do you derive, how do you get from the two basic ideas – Jesus isn't God and there's no hell – how do you get from those ideas to your seven principles. There must be some intermediate steps. But what a boring sermon that would make!

Third, how do you get from a vague principle, like a “free and responsible search” or the “right of conscience” to something specific, to legislation that our representatives can vote on? Should we get out of our economic gloom through austerity or through Keynesian fiscal policy? The UU principles don't tell us. Should we counter global warming through regulation or through market approaches? Again, the UU principles don't tell us. Should we counter the so-called Islamic State through military means or through education? A UU doesn't know the answer to this any more than anyone else.

Don't get me wrong. I don't mean to say that our democratic system isn't in need of reform. Just look at Congress. Not the grid-locked mess that we've been stuck with in recent years, but the electoral system enshrined in the Constitution and in decades of history. Way back in the 20th century, the Supreme Court laid down the one person, one vote rule. That is, legislative districts must be equal in population – or pretty darn close to equal – so that each person's vote is equal to everyone else's.<sup>1</sup>

But then consider the United States Senate. Wyoming has two Senators. Do you know how many Senators California would have to have for California residents to have the same level

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<sup>1</sup> See *Reynolds v. Sims*, 377 U.S. 533 (1964).

of representation as Wyoming's? I don't either. But I think it's about a hundred. And we can't change that without Wyoming's approval. You know that's never going to happen.<sup>2</sup>

Or take the U.S. House of Representatives. Throw together the use of single-member districts, the far from random distribution of voters of different parties within the states, gerrymandering of district lines to favor whoever is drawing the lines or perhaps incumbents generally, the disproportionate influence of money, lower turnout in nonpresidential election years, the absence of districts crossing state lines, and the disenfranchisement of those behind bars and of those who were behind bars in the past – and what do you have? I don't know, but I'm pretty sure it's not democracy.

But, Dave, stay away from all this. It's not the proper subject for a sermon, for a UU sermon. Why don't you preach on All Saints Day? It's coming up the following Saturday, on November 1. And, for God's sake, if you must do a democracy sermon, don't mention the Supreme Court and the Voting Rights Act. There's nothing to be gained by going there.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Our Hero, President Taft

Dear Dave,

I don't know where you think you're going with "Democracy? Where?", but isn't the real issue, the issue we don't like to talk about, isn't it whether a political conservative a – dare I say the word – a *Republican* can be a Unitarian Universalist? And the answer is Yes! Unequivocally, absolutely, yes – Republicans can be UUs, and UUs can be Republicans. The most recent Unitarian president, William Howard Taft, was a Republican.

Our first principle affirms "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." That is to say, we have enshrined individualism as our starting point. And individualism means – the essence of individualism is – individual rights and responsibility. People should be permitted to make their own decisions, without interference from the government. People must take care of themselves; families must take care of themselves. Now, of course, there must be a legal framework, we conservatives are not anarchists.

Unitarian Universalists affirm the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." In simpler terms, that means that we believe in education. Adults have the responsibility to obtain the education they need to be able to support themselves and their families. We all have the responsibility to obtain the education we need to be responsible citizens. Parents have

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Sanford Levinson, *Our Undemocratic Constitution: Where the Constitution Goes Wrong (and How We the People Can Correct It)* (2008).

<sup>3</sup> See *Shelby County v. Holder* (U.S. June 25, 2013).

responsibility to make sure that their children receive a good education. And parents have the right to determine what constitutes a good education for their children.

And that takes us to the democracy question: who should be allowed to vote? Specifically, what, if any, educational requirement should there be for voters, and who should decide? Please remember that the Constitution, as originally adopted and as amended over the years, does not guarantee the right to vote. Universal suffrage is found nowhere in the Constitution. The Constitution leaves the determination of voter qualifications to the states. Uniformity is not required.

The Supreme Court ruled many years ago that requiring voters to be able to read and write – imposing a literacy test – does not violate the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause.<sup>4</sup> Congress struck down literacy tests because they were used in Southern States – states controlled by the Democratic Party, I should note – to prevent *literate* African Americans from voting.<sup>5</sup>

Given the complexity of the issues facing our nation today it seems to make sense, doesn’t it? to make sure that we have a well educated, well informed electorate.

I have this sense that you would like to ask me about voters and elected officials who deny the reality of evolution, who deny the reality and the danger of climate change. In my view, such people have no place in the conservative movement. We are not know-nothings.

What about voter identification requirements?

They’ve been the subject of quite a lot of litigation in the last few years. I just don’t see the big deal. You cash a check; you travel by air; you stay in a motel – they all ask to see a driver’s license. It’s just part of life in 21st century America. Get over it. Now, it has been alleged that such requirements, when applied to voting, have the effect of discouraging certain people from participating. You know, electoral rules always have partisan implications; it’s the nature of things. You cannot expect legislators to operate in a vacuum.<sup>6</sup>

And what about money in politics?

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<sup>4</sup> See *Lassiter v. Northampton County Board of Elections*, 360 U.S. 45 (1959).

<sup>5</sup> See the Voting Rights Act of 1965, 42 U.S.C. 1973 ff.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., “In a Footnote, a Heavy Slap at Texas’ Past.” *New York Times*, October 19, 2014, page A27.

As believers in individual freedom, including freedom to lawfully earn and retain money and freedom of speech, we see no basis for regulating political contributions or expenditures.<sup>7</sup>

Two more issues then I'll stop.

Abortion. We UUs believe in the worth and dignity of *every* person, not just most people, not just people of a certain age, but of *every* person. How then can we not give the same tender care, the same compassion, for those still in the womb that we give to those who have joined us under the sun, and in the rain?

Capital punishment. Is holding someone imprisoned for seemingly endless decades treating him as a person of inherent worth and dignity? (Pope Francis himself has come out against life imprisonment without parole.<sup>8</sup>) Is keeping someone on death row year after year, never knowing what his fate will be or what day will be his last treating him as a person of inherent worth and dignity? No and No. If someone has committed the ultimate crime he is still deserving of respect. And consistent with that respect we should terminate his life, with a prompt and dignified execution.

### 3. We Are God's Hands

Dear Dave,

Many UUs stay home from church on the Sunday before election day, dreading the inevitable clichéd sermon, full of simplistic advice and cowardly avoidance of running afoul of the IRS. I hope you'll come right out and urge people to vote for [DELETED].

As UUs, we don't worry much about the next world. Some of us deny there is any such next world. Others of us believe there might be, but can't imagine that it's anything to be feared. Thus our focus is on this world. And because our concern is with all of humanity, and with all of the nonhuman realm, too, we cannot look at the world with a narrow focus. We're all in this together. Poverty and oppression should not be tolerated. Our concern includes future generations, too, not just those of us here now. Thus we take the threat of global warming completely seriously.

And whoever or whatever God is, and however we relate to God, we do not expect God to fix things for us. Some would say, "we are God's hands." Others would say "God gave us intelligence, and God gave us freedom – whatever needs to be done, it's up to us."

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<sup>7</sup> See generally Paul Krugman, "Plutocrats Against Democracy," New York Times, October 24, 2014, page A25.

<sup>8</sup> See "Pope Francis, Criminal-Justice Reformer?" New York Times website, "Taking Note," Oct. 24, 2014. The Pope, however, remains opposed to capital punishment.

Thus our religion takes us beyond abstract theological questions; our religion takes us beyond personal spirituality; our religion takes us beyond savoring the beauty of God's creation and humanity's creation; our religion takes us beyond giving thanks for all the blessings we have received. Our religion compels us to be involved in the world.

And in confronting what needs to be done, we believe in democracy. Not because democracy is a perfect system of governance, not because democracy is the best of all possible systems of governance. We believe in democracy while knowing that it is in fact the worst of all systems – except for all the others. We want democracy to work, but if we leave democracy to work on its own, it could go astray, or be kidnaped by those who would exploit it to their own advantage.

Let me mention two prerequisites for successful democracy – there are others, you can be sure.

First, education. We need a well educated and well informed electorate. Certainly we want everyone to be able to read, but we would hope that they can go far beyond that. We should all have a basic understanding of the scientific method, and that understanding, with appropriate instruction, should have led us to accept the theory of evolution, the threat of global warming, and the arbitrariness of declaring when life begins (or ends).

Second, fairness. We need to have a well-founded sense that elections have sensible rules and procedures and are conducted fairly. Thus, for example, it is unacceptable for some voters to have to wait an hour to vote while others don't have to wait at all. It is unacceptable to have voting hours so short that people who work long days and have long commutes cannot vote without taking time off from work, which they may not be allowed to do or may not be able to afford to do.

This is not a presidential election year, so maybe you can discuss in a neutral way how we elect the President. The electoral college system of electing the president and vice president gives states the number of presidential electors equal to their number of senators and representatives. Thus states with small populations are over represented, as they are in the Senate. In general, electors are awarded on a winner-takes-all basis. Thus if a state habitually votes heavily in one direction or the other, there's no point in campaigning there, and the particular needs of its citizens can, to a great extent, be ignored.

If we went to the popular election of the President, a new problem arises. What if there is a third party candidate whose modest but significant vote total prevents either major party candidate from receiving a majority of the votes? What happens then? As the Constitution

stands now, the House of Representatives chooses the President, between the top two, with each state having one vote.<sup>9</sup> That will never do.

#### 4. Plato Knows Best

Dear Dave,

Another UU apologist for democracy. How predictable, how boring. Dave, take a brave stand; tell the people that democracy doesn't work, or no longer works, and what we need is a philosopher king.<sup>10</sup>

You don't think I'm serious, do you? Let me describe a few of the problems that should lead us to move beyond democracy.

First, a theoretical, but very real, problem. Suppose there are three candidates and each receives one third of the votes. What do you do next? You could have a runoff between the top two (I assume there's not an actual tie), but what if the third place candidate is the second choice of all the other voters? Or what about voters who like Candidate A better than Candidate B, who like Candidate B better than Candidate C, and like Candidate C better than Candidate A. There's no ideal democratic system.<sup>11</sup>

Then there's the education problem. Will we ever have an electorate well enough educated to understand economics or statistics? Will we ever have an electorate that the marketing experts are unable to manipulate?

And what about apathy? Turnout for President is high, relatively speaking. But what about turnout for obscure judicial positions or municipal bond elections?

And then there's money. Our elected representatives spend an enormous amount of time raising money for reelection. Don't they have more important things that they should be doing? Can you possibly believe that the views of big donors don't affect their decision making?<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 12th Amendment (1804).

<sup>10</sup> See Plato, *Republic*.

<sup>11</sup> See Kenneth Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values* (1951).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Clyde Haberman, "Retro Report: The Cost of Campaigns" *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 2014; Timothy Egan, "The Disgust Election," *New York Times*, Oct. 23, 2014.

It should be clear to everyone that we're one world now. Look at how corporations are jumping around to find the lowest taxes. Look at how an economic slump in one part of the world can have an impact on those half way around the globe. We need world government, and the United Nations isn't designed for the job, and can you really imagine electing a world parliament? I can't.

And here's the big one: safeguarding our future. I'm thinking of global warming, but after we've dealt with that, it could be something else. How do we persuade voters, and elected officials answerable to voters, to take a long term rather than a short term view?<sup>13</sup> Human evolution did not equip us to look 30 or 300 years into the future.

But, you protest, who would be the philosopher king? How would we choose him, or her. Doesn't power corrupt, and absolute power corrupt absolutely?

I've thought of that. Here's the solution. Think of how long computers have been around – they're no older than you are – and consider how much they've improved in that time. Imagine how powerful a supercomputer might become in the next half century. So we program a supercomputer, installing in it the best of values, assuring that it will be benevolent. We program it to learn from experience. We arrange it to have a world wide network so that it has knowledge and control over everything. We design it so that once we get it started we cannot change it or turn it off. The supercomputer is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal, and benevolent. The perfect governor, the perfect ruler. Future generations will come to call it God.

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OK, we've had the four letters. Now it's my turn, time for my sermon on democracy.  
[NOT FOUND]

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<sup>13</sup> As the effects of global warming become a present reality and not just a hypothetical distant threat, this may be changing. See "Pragmatism on Climate Change Trumps Politics at Local Level Across U.S.," New York Times, Oct. 25, 2014, p. A12.