

October Theme For Spiritual Practice
Leadership: The Practice of Democracy

*I'm tired of hearing it said that democracy doesn't work. Of course it doesn't work.
We are supposed to work it. - Alexander Woollcott*

Introduction

One of the principles we affirm and promote as Unitarian Universalists is “*the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and society at large.*” The principle comes to mind especially this fall as our country makes the momentous decision of electing the next president. Here in Massachusetts we are using the democratic process to make decisions on no less than four ballot questions, including such the legalization of marijuana, increasing the cap on charter schools, expanding slot machine gaming, and regulating the conditions for farm animals. Such important issues and elections can at times overwhelm our ability to stand back and look at questions of democracy and leadership with a clear eye. So perhaps it might help to see these questions through a lens where the stakes are not quite as high: professional football and the New England Patriots!

For those who don't know about the game here in New England or could care less, the season has seen quite the drama as the Patriots have seen their star quarterback suspended, and the back-up Jimmy Garoppolo¹ step into the breach. Furthermore, the quarterback in San Francisco, Colin Kaepernick, has responded to the killing of black Americans by police by refusing to stand during the singing of the National Anthem before game. Both Garoppolo bring to mind thoughts of leadership and democracy. Both of these men are providing leadership in his own way. Did they get there as a result of democracy or by some other means? Garoppolo got there as the result of a decidedly undemocratic process when Roger Goodell dictated Tom Brady's punishment. Goodell was given this right, I suppose, by the democratic process in the league of the teams' owners selecting the commissioner; but his dictate was anything but democratic.

Permission for Kaepernick's action is granted under our constitution which was enacted through democratic means. He is providing leadership for a cause, to bring attention to a social ill in our country. The First Amendment guarantees his right to protest in a manner in which he sees fit – it is the basis of our democracy. It gives him, and all that are on the American soil, the right to free speech and religious expression. This amendment also

¹ Jimmy G is the replacement for Tom Brady, NE Patriots' quarterback, who is serving a suspension. The suspension was handed down by the commissioner of the football league who acted as both judge and jury.

gives those who disagree with him to express themselves freely; it gives us the right to gather on Sundays in our sanctuary and to agree or disagree with one another and still, as our covenant says, “Dwell together in peace, seek truth in love, and help one another.”

As participants of a religion that values unity in the midst of diversity, and that invites us to use the democratic process to decide everything from who our leaders are, what our budget will be, and how we use our resources, we have the opportunity to practice leadership and democracy. Each of us has a voice no matter what our faith heritage, our political, our fiscal, or our social beliefs. As Reverend Detering often reminds us, we are all welcome, all encouraged, to express our own ministries. We all have the chance to lead guided by our principles and by our covenant.

Questions for discussion and discernment on your own, or with each other

1. What qualities do you look for in a leader?
2. Where are you a leader?
3. What role do you have as a leader in this congregation?
4. What are the goals of leadership?
5. Does leadership necessitate followers?
6. What does leadership look like without followers?
7. What does democracy look like without a leader?
8. What does democracy look like with only leaders?
9. How is congregational polity democratic?
10. How do the 7 principles direct us in a democratic way?
11. How do you recognize and work with negative leadership?
12. What does it mean to 'lead from your seat' in a group?
13. What's the difference between authority and leadership?

Quotes and Short Readings

For those of us who want to see democracy survive and thrive—and we are legion—the heart is where everything begins: that grounded place in each of us where we can overcome fear, rediscover that we are members of one another, and embrace the conflicts that threaten democracy as openings to new life for us and for our nation. — Parker J. Palmer

“In our religious lives, the democratic process requires trust in the development of each individual conscience—a belief that such development is possible for each of us, as well as a commitment to cultivate our own conscience. We could call it a commitment to the value of each person. In the words of [Theodore Parker](#), ‘Democracy means not “I am as good as you are,” but “You are as good as I am.”’ My connection with the sacred is only as precious as my willingness to acknowledge the same connection in others.” — Rev. Parisa Parsa

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In a democracy, the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppressions upon the minority. - Edmund Burke

Democracy implies that the man must take the responsibility for choosing his rulers and representatives, and for the maintenance of his own 'rights' against the possible and probable encroachments of the government which he has sanctioned to act for him in public matters. - Ezra Pound

Ancient Chinese military general and "Art of War" author Sun Tzu described a leader as one who "cultivates the moral law, and strictly adheres to proper methods and discipline."

Leadership is all about giving and serving. "It is lonely at the top, but that's no excuse for not giving generously of your time, your experience and your encouragement to your team — and never expecting any of that in return. You are the person in the unique position of finding or uncovering strengths in people, leveraging them and celebrating them. If you're going to lead, and lead well, you have to put it all out there every day, regardless of the outcome. Leaders who hold back will eventually hold their teams back."
– Tricia Sciortino

Democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others! - Winston Churchill

Let us never forget that government is ourselves and not an alien power over us. The ultimate rulers of our democracy are not a President and senators and congressmen and government officials, but the voters of this country. - Franklin D. Roosevelt

Leaders set the right example. "Leadership is setting an example in the way you act each day, while focusing on the bigger picture. It's about setting the tone for your team and organization in the way you interact with your own staff, your business partners and your customers. As a leader, it is your responsibility to establish goals, innovate, motivate and trust. A passionate and compassionate leader can energize a company. Set an example of cooperation, trust and openness. Focus on solutions and positivity instead of finding faults and blame for actions." – Richard Kissane

The Philosopher Jacob Needleman reflects on the nature of our American democratic system in a book entitled *The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders*:

The concept of freedom has become so trivialized. It's wonderful to be able to go where I want and do what I want and buy what I want, buy and buy, and get and get, and talk and talk, and I have no constraints. We certainly need external liberty. God knows, that's one of the most precious things this country has to offer the masses of humanity who have come here. I don't mean to put that down in any way. Without that, the rest is just

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academic. But freedom and liberty have an inner meaning. We have to ask, "What is this freedom for?" It's not just a freedom to get a big house and a big car and a lot of goods. Inner freedom means inwardly to be free from these egoistic, selfish cravings which make our life turn around into chaos. It's an interior freedom, which maybe you can say is mystical or certainly spiritual, but without that dimension to the idea of freedom, the idea of freedom becomes purely external and eventually selfish.

A democratic citizen is not a citizen who can do anything he wants; it's a citizen who has an obligation at the same time. Look at freedom of speech. What is the duty associated with it? The right of free speech implies the duty of allowing others to speak. If I have the right to speak, I have the duty to let you speak.

Now, that's not so simple. It doesn't mean just to stop my talking and wait till you're finished and then come in and get you. It means I have an obligation inwardly. Inwardly, I have to work at listening to you. That means I don't have to agree with you, but I have to let your thought into my mind in order to have a real democratic exchange between us. And that is a very interesting work of the human being, don't you think?