

American Promises
November 13, 2016
Rev. Linda Simmons

John Adams, prideful second president of the United States and a Unitarian, did not consider all people fit to vote, yet he thought every man had the right to make up his own mind over what to believe about politics, religion, or anything else— not only the right, but the duty to think for himself.¹

Rev. William Ellery Channing, a Unitarian, never suffered for want of anything. Yet, he called himself a working man to show his solidarity with the new laboring classes of his early industrial age. He believed that all individuals, including slaves and women, deserved the freedom to think and act according to their own wisdom, and he believed this because of his Unitarian faith in what lay inside each soul and the potential of God's creatures.²

The social thinker and activist Jane Addams, who attended Unitarian churches and embraced Unitarian theology, did more than ask for social justice— she embodied it. She built relationships, living in community, that taught her that all people long security and shelter as well as beauty, meaning and love. She connected workers and bosses, social scientists and politicians, educators and ministers, philanthropists and activists from around the world. She wanted governments to attend human needs. And she wanted common human needs to drive global change.³

These liberals and the rest of their intellectual family tree helped Americans and others think about why human beings ought to treat one another as equals who deserve to be free.⁴

A democratic approach to religion, which Unitarians were at the forefront of, forged the real liberal tradition in America,⁵ the basis of democracy itself, and led to Unitarian social justice movements like prison and mental health reform, public education, the NAACP, the American Civil Liberties Union, many of the first suffragists and abolitionists, and more recently advocacy for gay marriage, immigrants justice, reproductive rights, black lives matter, climate justice and the support of our Muslim brothers and sisters. Unitarianism forms one of the building

¹ Amy Kittelstrom, . The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2015), Kindle Edition, 1-2.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 3.

⁴Ibid, 3.

⁵ Ibid, 7.

blocks of the American promise my friends, the promise that all people have a right to a place at the table.

The words of democracy did not first include all people. We know them well: *We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal*, and they were men who were of the upper classes, but they must have known, they must have imagined that you cannot float that great of a promise, that rich of a promise as equality to one class of people without the next and the next and the next coming for their equality until the very table of this American promise is overloaded with diversity that pulls out a chair and demands to be seen and free.

The liberal agenda, that crosses bi-partisan lines, that is deeper than political alliances, that includes the creation of social security, unions, head start, maternity leave, Medicare, Medicaid, Equal Pay, affordable Day Care, equal access to Health Care, access to affordable Child Care, extended Maternity Leave is one that needs to be re-invigorated, re-imagined and re-claimed but its roots are good and its sources are sound.

I know many of us are grieving today after the election results. I have heard from so many of you. I have heard great fear for and from many of the most vulnerable groups among us. The pain, fear and anger are visceral.

I recognize and honor this suffering and I recognize and honor that not all among us are feeling this way. Not all of us voted for Clinton. And I love these people I know you do you too. And I would again and have stood with these friends when they have been suffering and so have you, and they have stood beside you in your suffering. And this is true my friends and I wish to take just one moment of empathetic presence to recognize that we are still one people, in one democratic country and that in this Meeting House we are Unitarian Universalists united under the unifying principle of the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

No matter who occupies the position of President, whenever the rights of the most vulnerable are eroded, it is our duty as Americans and Unitarians to stand with them and beside them, to decide who we are, to gather our strength and do what our forefathers and foremothers laid the groundwork for us to do: to think for ourselves, to show up authentically, to raise our voices in solidarity and to discern right action.

This has been true and will always be true. Nothing changed this week to make this different. Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love* and *The Signature of All Things* which by the way is our interconnectedness, posted right after the election about what else has not changed. I will read you some from her post.

“I did not expect this outcome...and the fact that I did not imagine it as possible means that clearly I have been out of touch with the hearts and minds of millions of my fellow Americans. I cannot say that I understand them...And yet this is the world we wake up to today.

OK. Every single day, you must face whatever world you have woken up to — whatever that may be. That's the only world you get. You must start there.”

Gilbert asked herself who she wanted to be in this situation.

She recalled when her partner received the news that she had tumors in her body and they were waiting to hear about whether they were cancerous. She and her partner were lost, angry, in what she calls their “animal bodies” feeling hunted and out of control.

And they decided that before they got the results, which turned out to be terminal cancer, they would chose who they were now and who they would be when they got the results. They decided that they are:

Calm. Strong. Open-hearted. Curious. Generous. Wise. Brave. Humorous. Patient.

And they realized that this is who they had to be regardless of the test results, that there was no other choice. Because the test of who we are does not happen when we get what we want. It happens when we feel that things have gone wrong, when we are afraid, when we feel lost. When we feel hunted, yes, even then too.

If our Latino brothers and sisters are at risk of being deported who have lived here and given to this nation along side of us for years, who will you be?

If our nation breaks in two as we lash out at each other without empathy, creating only an us and a them, who will you be?

If climate controls continue to be disregarded, and our earth continues to suffer and those most vulnerable continue to be displaced by this process, who will you be?

If those who voted for Trump among us or who feel that Clinton was the wrong choice and could not vote for her, feel unwelcomed here, unheard and uncared for, who will you be?

If people lose their health care and the middle class and poor grow poorer, regardless of who they voted for, who will you be?

Can we be people that we can love enough to fuel the courage and strength that are needed for the road ahead? Can we be a people that wake up in the morning and look back on a day and say of ourselves that we listened, that we considered, that we took actions that were thoughtful and balanced, that we offered solutions that took into account needs that were not our own, that we did not ask others to be what we were not willing to be ourselves?

And this must be said too. Those of us who voted for Clinton have our work to do in the areas of misogyny and racism as we point fingers across the aisle to those who voted differently. We as liberals and Unitarian Universalists still have so much to do to root out the misogyny and racism in our hearts and minds, we have more to do to recognize ourselves in others, to allow others a place at our table who feel and see

and think differently than we do. We can no longer afford to leave out people whom we can learn from and who can learn from us. We all share this work as Americans and it is time to do it together with love and empathy and understanding so that we can become one nation worthy of our American and our Unitarian principles.

Failing now can only mean letting this despair render us incapable of seeing when it is our time to stand stronger, more clearly, more fully, more capably for all Americans, whether white or black, whether gay or straight, whether identified female or male, whether Republican or Democrat, lower, middle or upper class. We fail or succeed now my friends. This election proves only that the time is now.

Charles Taylor is a Canadian philosopher best known for his contributions to political philosophy, the philosophy of social science, history of philosophy and intellectual history and was recently interviewed for the *New Yorker* for an article entitled, *How to Restore Your Faith in Democracy*. He said,

“We all seek a sense of what it would be like to be fully connected to something. We all have a sense of what really living, and not just existing, would be. We know that there’s a level of life that’s rare to attain. And whether we attain that or not can be a source of deep satisfaction or shame to us.”

It’s possible, Taylor said, to live as a “resident alien” in a democracy, going to work and raising your family without “getting a charge” out of the democratic story. But something might happen to change that. “The feeling that I’m really happy to be living in this society or that I’m really upset; that I’m either living fully or being deprived of that experience—those feelings are signs that the ethic of democracy has seized you.”

Take time to grieve. Take this time. Take the time and then remember who we are.

We are Americans and Unitarian Universalists, mighty, fierce, compassionate, understanding, willing, capable and ready to stand when asked, to learn what we yet don’t know, to be transformed, to be awake and awake still. Let these ethics seize you and let us continue to be the change we seek in the world.

Let's work together my friends. There are many ideas of how to move forward. I am listening. I am here. I love you.

Elizabeth Gilbert closed her piece by saying these words: This is how you lead. This is who you are. This is how you BE.

I have printed our principles on the back of the order of service. Let’s close by reading them together:

[1st Principle](#): The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

[2nd Principle](#): Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

[3rd Principle](#): Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

[4th Principle](#): A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

[5th Principle](#): The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

[6th Principle](#): The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

[7th Principle](#): Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Amen and blessed be.