

Sermon Transcript

Deep Democracy

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I have a confession to make. And it makes me feel like a bad Unitarian Universalist. Many days, I am *not* excited about democracy. Each morning, when I turn on MPR and pour my whole grain cereal, then the soy milk, glug, glug, glug into the little white bowl, I hear increasing evidence that our democracy isn't working.

Unfortunately, it's a long litany. Our elections fail international fairness standards.¹ Torture is committed in our names. Lobbyists lure politicians with money and luxuries. It takes more money than I can comprehend to run for office — I try to knock off a bunch of zeros to try to make sense of it. The mixing of church and state is further fodder for my cynicism. Have you heard the one about a newcomer who was wandering about the inside of a Unitarian Universalist church?

He was approached by a member. "Is there something you're looking for?" she asked.

"I've looked all over but I don't see the Ten Commandments posted anywhere." replied the newcomer.

"Hey," replied the member, "this is a church, not a Federal courthouse."

You know the list doesn't end there: our healthcare system is failing us, and we're on the brink of environmental disaster, let alone the war with Iraq. We're mired in a two-party deadlock that seems inadequate to these tasks. I ask, "Has our democracy failed us?"

Maybe that's not the question. Perhaps we should ask, "Have we failed our democracy?" In most presidential elections in the past 70 years, barely half of eligible voters cast a ballot. Only 3% of Americans worked for the election of a political party in 2002. Between 1973 and 1993, the number of Americans writing to Congress dropped by 23%, and the number attending a political rally or speech dropped by 34%. Three-quarters of us feel that "the government is run by a few big interests looking out only for themselves."² Our attempts to address the immediate needs of our national problems feel like we're planting cut flowers.

In her book, *Democracy's Edge*, writer and activist Francis Moore Lappe says, "If you're like most Americans the word democracy is a yawn; it's boring, wrapped in duty or perhaps hypocrisy." We find ourselves asking if democracy failed us, or if we failed democracy.

But this question sets up a false dialectic. We want to name our experience as a success or failure, good or bad, and be done with it. Democracy is not a *thing* to fail us, and we can't fail a *thing*. As Lappe writes, "Democracy is not a 'thing' we have, something done for us or to us. Democracy is *what we do*, something rewarding because it meets our deep needs and capacities for connection with one another and effectiveness in the larger world."³

¹ Francis Moore Lappé. Democracy's Edge: Choosing to Save Our Country by Bringing Democracy to Life. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006, 7.

² Ibid. 7-8.

³ Ibid. 153.

Democracy is a process; it's a way of relating to the world, to the community, and to ourselves. We need to hold both the pain and the promise of this democracy, and it's in this tension that we might discover our own power.⁴ Francis Moore Lappe points out that "the crisis isn't our powerlessness, but our *feeling* of powerlessness."⁵

We tend to believe that only the upper class, the experts, the officials can make decisions and make change.⁶ But our problems are too complex for people removed from the problem to provide a solution. We need a bigger circle of problem solvers. We need the people who are closest to the problems to contribute to the solutions.⁷

Power is not a fixed-sum game; it's not a thing that only corporations and the government have. But, as long as we believe that it's not worth the trouble, that we can't spend time on something that doesn't pay the bills, we've given up our power. As long as we believe we're the only ones who care, we won't act.⁸

But, the truth is that we are not alone. Many people from all walks of our country and the world are making significant changes.⁹

- People in New York State have started "fusion voting," to break the two-party deadlock.
- The new "Working Families" party has lifted the New York's minimum wage by \$2 an hour.
- Grassroots-led campaign-finance reforms are limiting the influence of private wealth on elections in Maine and Arizona.
- In the last two decades, socially responsible investments have grown from \$40 billion to \$2 trillion
- In the last ten years, the fair trade movement has begun to affect purchasing from Brueggers Bagels to Safeway, lifting more than a million small coffee farmers out of destitution.
- In law enforcement, a restorative justice emphasis relies on community leadership to rehabilitate nonviolent transgressors and return them to the community, with huge public savings.
- The far right may call unions special interest groups, but though their membership has shrunk, unions are still 16 million people strong in this country.¹⁰ And that's my inheritance: I'm the daughter of a union organizer.
- Just five years ago Nelsonville, Ohio, was a sad town of about 5,000 people with empty storefronts. In 2003, Miki Brooks opened FullBrooks Coffee Shop. What started as a thirst for coffee became the hub of the community, and the residents began to meet, act, and dream. Within just five years, the empty buildings were full selling works of local artisans; there are weekly cultural events, a fabulous arts program from children.¹¹

There are 1600 more stories like this about everyday people, like you and me, finding solutions in their communities. Go to smallplanetinstitute.org.

Sometimes, it's seemingly small ways we can be empowered. The other week, I was sitting in the smallest room of my house reading this cover article from National Geographic, *Amazon: Forest to Farm*. If you can't

⁴ Ibid. ix.

⁵ Ibid. 5.

⁶ Ibid. 30.

⁷ Ibid. 9

⁸ Ibid. 31.

⁹ The examples cited are from Francis Moore Lappé, *Hungry for Democracy*, www.uuworld.org, Fall 2006, 8.15.06, accessed 1/20/07.

¹⁰ Lappé, *Democracy's Edge*, 158.

¹¹ Frances Moore Lappé, *Caffeinated Community Comeback: Small Ohio Town Discovers Power of Networking*, <http://democracysedge.org/action-nelsonville.php>, accessed 1/20/07.

see the cover, it's a barren land with a single tree. So, I got to thinking about toilet paper. I looked at the label on my Costco tissue. I shop at Costco to support their fair labor practices and to save money. But, when I looked at the label, this is what I read: "made in Brazil." My toilet paper was part of the problem. I know I'm not alone, and so I'm acting. I buy *Green Forest* 100% recycled toilet paper now.

Lappe calls this type individual empowerment "living democracy." Psychologists Arnold and Amy Mindell call it "deep democracy." This is democracy based in the process of relationships. It isn't easy. It isn't clean. But, it's rich and filled with possibility. And it's our hope.

There is an upsurge of citizen leadership, particularly faith motivated, and it's not just the religious right. "Our faith calls us to overcome our fear of inadequacy, our shyness, our busy lives, to listen to the worries and dreams of our neighbors, particularly the disenfranchised, and to act on *that* agenda."¹² This is no less than building the beloved community.

Democracy is not just a civic duty, but as Unitarian Universalists, it grows out of our theology. We believe in the worth and dignity of every person, we believe people not only should, but *are* capable of governing themselves. But do we believe this of ourselves? We know we are interconnected: it is in working these connections that we will find solutions.

But, I'm preaching to the choir. You know this. It's reflected in popular humor about us. How about this one?

How many UUs does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Twenty. Seven to form a committee to discuss the ecological implications of compact fluorescent vs. incandescent bulbs, six to form a committee to discuss labor practices, six on the aesthetics committee to discuss the exact tint and wattage, and one who goes ahead and does it without consulting anyone else.

We can turn terror and fear on its head. Francis Moore Lappe does this with 9/11: on that day 19 hijackers and a few thousand cheering them on wrought tremendous destruction and terror. "If humans are capable of such coordinated evil, why do we often doubt small numbers can make a change for the good?"¹³

To quote Dee Hock, the founder and former CEO of Visa, "It is far too late and things are far too bad for pessimism."¹⁴ Rooted in reality, we can reach into solutions. What would our community look like if we were ten times bolder? What if we suspend our cynicism and act as *if*? Social psychology studies show us that actions lead to belief. We may need to act *before* we believe we can make a change.

As Niebuhr warns us back in 1944, we can't be so optimistic that we fall into sentimentality, which will give way to despair. But we also know from Rabbi Lerner that when we give up our highest aspirations and tell ourselves to be "realistic," we will never be visible to one another. As Marge Piercy writes, "we must be every one the connection between energy and mass, every one the lightning that strikes to topple the tower...Each time we say *sisters*, each time you say *brothers*, we are making magic...we are each other's miracle..."¹⁵

As Lappe tells us, "To save the democracy we thought we had we need to take democracy to where it's never been." Let's go together. May it be so. Amen.

¹² Lappé, *Democracy's Edge*, 154-5.

¹³ *Ibid.* 153.

¹⁴ quoted in *Ibid.* 3.

¹⁵ Marge Piercy, *The Magician*.