

## Young, Scrappy, and Hungry

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Unity Church Unitarian

Last October, I walked into the CIBC Theatre in Chicago to see the hit musical *Hamilton*. Unlike most of the audience, I didn't have every lyric memorized. In fact, I had never even heard the soundtrack. But as a former American History major, I was irresistibly drawn to another perspective on the birth of our nation and the earliest days of this flawed, yet worthy experiment we call democracy.

By intermission, I was awestruck. It wasn't just the music, the staging or the compelling portrayal of Alexander Hamilton's life, which is often overlooked. It was the genius of Lin-Manuel Miranda's deliberate shift in our classic American perspective. The revolutionary tale is experienced through the lives of gritty New Yorkers, not the usual respectable Bostonians or gentry Virginia. (Spoiler alert: the two Unitarians featured in the musical, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson,

don't come off in the most favorable light!) The decision to cast people of color in the majority of the roles, especially the Founding Fathers, highlights both the power of those original democratic ideals and the depths of America's past and current hypocrisy. Song after song, we are reminded that the forging of this American democracy and the fight for independence from British royal rule did not begin under a single, unified vision by the people and their leaders. Everything was at stake then, as it is today. So when Hamilton sings his signature line: "I'm just like my country/I'm young, scrappy and hungry/ And I'm not throwing away my shot," we are reminded of our own, continued hunger for liberty and freedom. What is the one shot that we dare not throw away, today, in 2018's America?

That question looms large for me this week. 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebrations have already begun, fireworks are exploding and the stars and stripes are flying everywhere. Last Sunday, I flew home from the Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly, our own experiment in religious democracy, and got in my car to drive to the vigil for Thurman Blevins, a North Minneapolis resident, who was gunned down by the police in an alley near his home. I saw the faces of congressmen, city

council-people and other elected officials in the crowd. In Washington, the Supreme Court released a series of controversial, close decisions and Justice Kennedy announced his impending retirement. In New York, 28 year old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez upset the 4<sup>th</sup> ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives for a chance to sit in Congress. Just yesterday, Americans took to the streets across the nation to demand the reunification of migrant families, along with the end of family detentions and this administration's zero tolerance policy. Patriotism means many things to many different people at this moment of history and our hunger for fairness and justice and a government that works for all the people goes unmet by a divided, contentious nation.

You know all of this - I know you read the newspapers and watch the news, too. But, wherever you come down on the issues facing us, I suspect that we all share a piece of the hope and despair and the nagging doubt as to whether or not this democracy will ever achieve its founding vision. Like Alex, I have a more complicated relationship to what it means to be an American than I did as a child, growing up in white, middle class privilege. No one told me in direct, clear terms that this nation, build on the dream of being for the people and by the people, was forged on the backs

of chattel slavery and the genocide of the indigenous people who called this sacred land home long before the Europeans arrived, fleeing homelands of their own. Yet, also like Alex, I was raised as a Unitarian Universalist to believe in democracy as a religious value. The fifth of our seven principles calls us to “affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and society at large.” The tradition of congregational polity out of which both American Unitarianism and Universalism come, the right of lay members to write their own bylaws, elect their own leadership, and call their own ministers, goes hand in hand with the larger democratic experiment. In many ways, we have the same flawed history to answer for.

So, for me, our democracy’s current political crisis is a spiritual one, too. If the democratic principle I was raised to believe in has never truly existed in practice, is it still worthy of my faith? Is the failure inherent in the dream itself, or merely the flawed human beings and institutions which try to embody it? The truth is that the original debates about democracy between Hamilton and his compatriots were never fully resolved, and white America has never consistently faced the irrevocable harm done by birthing our supposedly free nation on the foundations of racism and

patriarchy. Perhaps I should not be surprised that Americans are not in agreement today about who we are now and who we should be becoming. In recent years, I have tried to listen to voices I don't often hear, who help me shift the standard story of American life. But, deep down, in my heart of hearts, despite all my critique, I still believe in democracy's potential. Not because of any political evidence per se, but rather because I have witnessed the radical power of freedom in religion. Religious democracy may not be perfect either, but in Unitarian Universalism I have seen freedom's power to transform from within.

Unitarian Universalism is creedless faith. That means that at its heart, it affirms and promotes individual conscience and the right of each of us to have a direct relationship with our God, and to name the Sacred, or not name it, by the truth of our own experience. Early Universalists even invented a formal Liberty Clause, to ensure that no individual Universalist could be excommunicated because their religious views differed from the majority of their neighbors. Does this mean that Unitarian Universalism was always as theologically diverse and spiritually inclusive as it is today? No. Because left to our own devices, human beings tend to set the boundaries of community within our own comfort zones, as defined by

class, culture, and more. But what our commitment to religious freedom does mean is that whenever a radical new theological perspective appeared in our midst, whether it was transcendentalism or humanism, feminism or paganism, and controversy arose, someone came forward to ask the critical question: do we truly believe in the right of conscience or not? And so, after the ensuing discussion and debate, the circle of inclusion was cast wider, and ever wider still through the centuries. Dr. Frederick May Eliot, longtime minister of this congregation in the early 1900's and an avowed theist, called the question on behalf of the humanists, just when they needed the support the most.

The strength of a principle, the worthiness of a vision, is not found in its history, but in the innovative, better future to which it calls us. This, I think, is what Eleanor Roosevelt meant when she called 1960's America back to what it means to have a deep-seated faith in the cause of freedom: "before we can meet successfully the challenge of tomorrow, we must learn to think freshly, to re-examine our beliefs, to see how many of them are living and real." We live in a time today, when we are being called to reexamine our beliefs in democracy, to see how many of them are and may still become living and real. It is a time of immense challenge and

responsibility, but also incredible opportunity. We recognize our own hunger and the hunger of our neighbors, and the urgency is telling us that this may be our moment. Collectively, we still have our shot to bring a freer and more just democracy into being.

First and foremost, we have a shot to recommit to democracy itself and to follow our faith's call to join others in creating as wide a circle of inclusion as possible. This will mean not only listening to the new voices emerging, but for white America to recognize that in fact, most of them are not new. They just haven't previously been taken seriously or fully welcomed at the tables of power. At General Assembly last week in Kansas City, MO, Brittany Packnett, delivered the annual Ware Lecture. She is currently Teach For America's Vice President of National Community Alliances as well as an activist, educator, policy expert, and someone, who in her own words: "plays many roles, all focused on freedom." (I commend her entire lecture to you, which you can view on video from the UUA's website [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org).) Packnett addressed the ways we have been talking about the crisis of family separation at the border as an example of our disconnection from one another's experiences of living in America. Over and over again, news commentators, elected leaders and others, have

sounded the rallying cry: “This is not who we are.” Recalling our history with the black and brown peoples of this nation and land, from the selling of babies out of the arms of their slave mothers to the snatching of indigenous children from their families at night into boarding schools so that the adults could be slaughtered, she took issue with that assessment. “Actually, white America, that is exactly who you are and who you have been. And we’ve been trying to tell you for years.” Hear in her challenge the echo of Langston Hughes poetic witness: “Freedom/Is a strong seed/Planted/In a great need./I live here, too./I want freedom/Just as you.”

19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister and activist Theodore Parker once proposed “Democracy means not ‘I am as good as you are,’ but ‘You are as good as I am.’ This challenge is clearly not a new one, as Unitarian Universalists or as Americans. If we are to recommit to democracy, we need to know each other’s stories and choose to be co-collaborators in this work. We need to stay in the conversation, especially when feelings get hurt or tensions get high or confusion reigns. This is especially true when we are confronting the ways white fragility and white supremacy prevent us from authentic relationship.

If we actually listen to each other and learn from each other's experiences, we have a shot to address our history and to correct it when we can. I grew up in Western New York, on land stolen from the People of the Longhouse. And yet I'm embarrassed to say that I was largely unaware of the debates around tribal rights and participation in our government. I recently came across an article from 2015 by Mark Trahan, entitled "Indigenous Voices are Needed to Make Us a Better Democracy." In it, he argues: "It's long past time for Indian Country to have a say in how the government of the United States runs. Why? Because this country cannot be the democracy it purports to be as long as indigenous people do not have a real voice in the political conversation....So what would be fair? How many American Indians and Alaska Native representatives should be in Congress?...A couple of years ago, Malia Villegas, director of the National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center, said population parity would mean at least two U.S. senators and seven members of the House of Representatives." Taking a different tact, through the history of Delegates to Congress which has been a tradition since 1797, Trahan notes that today there are six Delegates in Congress, representing Puerto Rico, Washington, D.C., Guam, U.S. Virgin Islands, American

Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, all from much smaller lands and tribes. What would be different about Standing Rock or the Enbridge pipeline right now, if Indigenous Peoples truly had a voice and a vote? It was the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who observed: "Democracy is when the indigent, not the men of property, are rulers."

Last, and far from least, by reckoning with our history, we have a shot to build a movement for collective liberation. This will require the realization that none of us are truly free, until we are all free. When I was a new, young minister, I served as an interim assistant minister at the Community Church of New York in Manhattan. One of the congregation's defining stories was their role in the 1993 UUA General Assembly in challenging the theme of the annual GA party: a Thomas Jefferson ball, celebrating a significant birthday anniversary of arguably one of the most famous American Unitarians. The program invited GA attendees to come in period dress. One Community Church member, a woman of Jamaican-American heritage, pointedly inquired: "And what costume should I come in? A ball and chains?"

The full story of that General Assembly would take an entire other sermon to unpack, but suffice to say that the ball was actually still held in modified fashion, while a huge number of GA attendees occupied the hotel lobby with a counter-event. The legacy and learning from that crisis of faith was far more than the reexamination of our faith's attachment to Thomas Jefferson and the Thomas Jefferson District changing its name. This year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> year after that moment, and at a workshop at this year's General Assembly all of the original players from all sides gathered to share their experience. To a person, black and white, the crisis was a defining moment in their own spiritual lives as Unitarian Universalists and in their own future commitment to a more anti-racist and free UUA. There was still pain in the room. But there was also healing and friendship, and a deeper understanding of the systems which harm us all. Rev. Mel Hoover, a longtime African-American leader in our movement, recalled being asked if his staff should just intervene and shut the ball down. He replied "no", because if we solve it for them, they'll never have the real conversation or struggle that is so desperately needed, if we are ever going to risk real change.

I meant it when I said that the state of our democracy, today and historically, is a political and spiritual challenge - for me and for us all. It has been said that the truth can make us free, but I am beginning to understand that it is the truth found in community that is at the heart of liberation. My faith in the value of democracy as a practice must be joined with yours, with my neighbors, with those who have fought for its freedoms, despite its harms. We need one another, now more than ever, because the great experiment is still not over, nor its final vision decided. It needs each and every one of us to be living and real. It is not easy, but then as Hamilton reminds us, it never was.

When asked how she keeps going in the work of freedom, Brittnany Packnett reflects: "I'm doing this because I love myself and our people and our ideals enough to make the sacrifice. If we are not thoughtful of how we let love inform power, if we don't operate that way, the wins we have will be temporary, the progress we make will be flimsy. Instead, if we operate with consistent love and power, I think that we can create change that is lasting and fully equitable, create social movements that don't keep leaving the most marginalized behind, and create a world where I want to raise my future children in."

Amen and so may it be.