

What Does Democracy Look Like?

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UCV

Reading:

I Call That Church Free
by James Luther Adams

*I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence,
That sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands.
It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority.
This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.
I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship,
That protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom;
It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.
It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.
The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers,
It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit "that bloweth where it listeth... and maketh all things new."*

James Luther Adams was one of Unitarianism's great 20th century thinkers. His description, in our reading today, of a "free church" highlights the compelling and abiding attraction and strength of our religious movement and its perennial challenge. Notice that he made no statement of dogma, doctrine or creed: no ready solace or certainty, no marching orders that seem so alluring to so many people in this confusing, time-stressed, easy-solution hungry world of ours. Rather, he identified the hallmarks of our community as a "caring and trusting fellowship." A fellowship of those who voluntarily enter into a "covenant" to protect and nourish our "integrity" and "freedom," our willing openness to the promptings of "insight and conscience," that is, a sensibility and a set of practices that bursts "traditions," gives rise to "new and living language" and to "new and broader fellowship." Covenant, fellowship, conscience, freedom and new language and broader fellowship that forge unity through and because of our diversity: these are the hallmarks of our religious and ethical tradition.

Now a moment's reflection on our part will reveal in this description of a free church a portrait of the kind of religious and ethical community, its values and commitments that surely we find compelling, and that we would want to support. However, that self-same portrait, discloses the challenge to those who would climb into the picture frame and dwell within it. Because what Adams describes is no holy, static icon, whose image conforms to a set of formal, unbending rules laid down once and for all in the distant past. Rather, the portrait of a free church depicts a living, breathing "subject" in motion; it's a diverse, ever broadening and inclusive fellowship of a free people inspired by insight and conscience. A fellowship that exists in order to achieve a fullness of life and worshipful meaning in the face of death as well as the challenges of this life for all who would enter this picture.

How does such a fellowship achieve that goal? And what does it have to do with democracy? Well here we go. The kind of fellowship I have been describing begins to take shape, first, by asserting what it believes fundamentally to be of basic value. It then identifies how to achieve its values.

Unitarians begin and end their statement of principles by affirming and promoting the "inherent worth and dignity of every person" and "respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part." We claim that worth and dignity of the individual and the interdependence of existence are inherent, or innate. That is to say: they are not acquired. They are not extended or granted by virtue of government decree, religious councils, or the traditions of culture.

What we are saying is that they are primary characteristics established by nature, origination, by birth and existence themselves. And then we take one more step and "covenant" to affirm and promote the flourishing of each, of the individual and that interdependent web.

Through insight and experience over the centuries, we have arrived at a place where we claim these two values. This is the ground on which we stand. Our covenant to promote their flourishing extends that foundation and creates a space within which we move and act. This is the ground clearing, action oriented vision of our progressive religious tradition. This is the where we begin, the what we believe, the necessary, but not sufficient condition for creating the unity in our diversity as a progressive fellowship and for extending the benefits of our vision beyond the ground on which we stand.

Having a "what" to value and believe is a necessary place to begin, but it is not enough. We also need a "how" to achieve our values; we need certain virtues, characteristics and practices in order to accomplish

the flourishing of the individual and the interdependent web of all existence. We have identified and named those attributes and procedures for achieving our values: they are the remaining five of our seven Unitarian principles. In the time remaining I am going to talk about the fifth principle, the one that reads, in part: “we covenant to affirm and promote.... the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

How fortunate we are to have been born in a time and nation where both the formal institutions and procedures and the informal dispositions necessary for democracy have been long advocated, tested, and made real in law and in the private domains of our common life. From Joseph Howe’s spirited defense of freedom of expression and the press in Nova Scotia in 1835, to the extraordinary struggles in the 20 th century for suffrage and equality of women in Canadian politics and society led by figures like Agnes Macphail and Therese Casgrain, to the more recent assertion by Canadian Catholic Bishops that “people are called to be responsible, creative agents...and primary actors...of their own history,” Canadians have asserted and struggled to make real what Moses Coady of Cape Breton called our “democratic creed.” That is, the proposition that, according to Coady, “all are equal and have rights to their fair share” of the civil, political, economic, social and cultural liberties and goods that are part and parcel of the common weal; those public and private goods that Therese Casgrain called our “primordial rights.” (on these sources, see Gruending, *Great Canadian Speeches*, 2004, pp. 6-9, 115-17, 141-43, 165-167, 222-225)

Democracy, in idea and practice, that is government by and for the people, in everyday actions and in the spirit of our diverse population, has been a major concern of all Canadians. It is reflected in our laws, constitution, and authoritative institutions and practices. Whether it flourishes or not also depends on our own individual and collective “democratic dispositions.” Dispositions that include a “preparedness to work with others different from oneself toward shared ends; a combination of strong convictions with a readiness to compromise in the recognition that one can’t always get everything one wants; and a sense of individuality and a commitment to civic goods that are not the possession of one person or of one small group alone.” (Jean Bethge Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial*, 1994, 2)

We know that democracy consists of both formal and informal institutions and practices. Carleton University’s Centre for Foreign Policy identifies three essential formal and interdependent elements for a functioning democracy as follows:

- The presence of institutions and procedures through which citizens can express effective preferences about alternative policies and leaders

- The existence of institutionalised constraints on the exercise of power by the executive (what we call a “separation of powers” that includes an independent judiciary)
- And the guarantee of civil liberties [and rights] in...daily life and in acts of political participation. (To which I would also include an independent and lively news media.)

To these features of a democratic society, we would add that democracy is more than formal institutions and practices. It also requires of us a set of lively, deeply held and oft expressed dispositions, or values. As I stated before, Unitarians begin with values that affirm and promote “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” and “respect for the interdependent web.” Those values should dispose us well for the work of building and sustaining democracy. And we need them, for democracy is not a once-for-all achievement; it is “a way of life”—it embraces values and practices people engage in daily in all aspects of our public lives, including the workplace, our schools, the community, our relations with the media, with human services, as well as with government.

As we well know, when we advocate the flourishing of “the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large,” we’re talking about a long, often painstaking, sometimes exasperating process of education, inclusion, deliberation, participation, and dialogue in order for the goods of democracy to be established in fact and deed. But we affirm it as a virtue, as a practice, as a how to achieve our principal and fundamental values. We know its worth as a means for meeting the deep human needs to know that our voices count and that we are responsible, creative agents of our own history: a history we shape through the decisions we make in the recesses of our own hearts, the privacy of our homes, and in the company of others in order to affect and achieve well-being and a meaningful life for ourselves and society at large. A commitment to democracy requires a great deal from us and is beset and confronted with formidable, corrosive challenges on all sides. The news from the front lines is not good, and we know it.

Take, as an example, free, fair and regular elections, and our participation in the political process. Barely half of us are voting in federal elections, with the youth vote being particularly low. Closer to home, less than a quarter of us voted on whether the composition of Vancouver’s City Council was to be determined by an at-large or a ward system of representation. Are we just taking all of this for granted? Are we getting lazy? Let me put it another way. Is it the case, in fact, that we are being presented on a regular basis with truly alternative policies and leaders such that citizens can express effective preferences?

Or are we living in what Tommy Douglas once famously called “Mouseland?” That world of Aesop where mice trooped to the polls every four years to elect a government and voted from a list comprised entirely of black and white cats. “Nice, dignified fellows,” Douglas called them, “who passed good laws.” Good that is for cats, like the one where mouse holes “had to be big enough so a cat could get his paw in,” or the one that said “mice could only travel at certain speeds—so that a cat could get his breakfast without too much effort.” (see Gruending, 153-4) I wonder whether there was a Mouse Gazette, owned and operated by mice that provided critical analysis and access to information about the Parliament of Cats? Or was the newspaper called, Feline News for Mice? Was that the problem?

Or perhaps we find ourselves disengaging from the electoral process, that we are becoming disenchanted with politics altogether, because market ideology has become so pervasive in our lives that we don’t think of ourselves as citizens at all. Instead of seeing ourselves as responsible, politically active masters of our own civic houses and public life; instead of acting as though our voices count; instead of shaping the decisions that most affect our lives because we know how to come together to solve common problems, that is, instead of acting as citizens, do we consider ourselves mere consumers of what the government can deliver? Is the government a political market that “delivers goods” that serves our interests; interests like laws, policies, education, services and subsidies that we “purchase” with our taxes? How often do we call ourselves “taxpayers” whose chief concern is how much money we spend for the goods and services tax dollars can buy?

If that is what we are reduced to, if we leave it up to “cats” to dispense the goods of government, and allow “cats” to acquire, consolidate, and control the media, then we truly live in a Mouseland even more heartless, abject, and dangerous than what Tommy Douglas could have foreseen. What we’re left with is a landscape of each mouse, and each mouse interest group pitted against the other in a zero sum game of consumption over finite political goods. Ultimate political consumers disabled, misinformed and discouraged away from deliberating together, as a public, for the purpose of reaching shared judgments and collective decisions about what to do for the common good. (on consumerist understanding of politics, see Michael K. Briand, *Practical Politics: Five Principles for a Community that Works*, 15-17)

But hey, I don’t want to blame it all on the mice. Low and stagnant wages, the specter of unemployment coupled with the whipsaw effect of rising costs of housing, energy, education, and child care, the pressures to work more, earn more and to compete more in order to just to stay afloat—what kind of toll is that taking on us in terms of anxiety, stress, burnout, and desperation? How could we begin and then sustain efforts to solve public problems when our private worlds are under this kind of pressure? Nearly everywhere we turn, the social deposits and social capital of intergenerational trust, neighbourliness, volunteerism, and other indicators of civic responsibility essential for a flourishing democracy are under siege. To these we could add racism, sexism, and other prejudices that keep millions from developing and contributing their full potential in professional, cultural and political life, and a corporate dominated media, fixated on scandal, consumerism and entertainment that collectively serve to only misinform and isolate us from one another.

What can we do in such a climate, one where democracy both as practice and disposition are giving way to disengagement, cynicism, and isolation? What to do? Not stand idly by and be resigned to this perilous state of affairs. We must act by returning to the beginning. Do you remember James Luther Adams’ description of a free church? We have and are members of a caring and trusting fellowship. We are intimately connected to one another by a covenant to protect and nourish our integrity and freedom, whose goal is a new and broader fellowship, based on the values of worth and dignity of the individual and the flourishing of the biodiversity of this dear world of ours. One characteristic practice, one virtue of this fellowship of ours is a commitment to democratic process in our congregations and in the world at large as a means of achieving our most deeply held values.

These values, this practice, and this current crisis of democracy led the Canadian Unitarian Council in May 2003 to authorize a two-year study on democracy that would result in resolutions being presented at this year’s Annual General meeting in Hamilton with the goal of putting Unitarians on record in support of democratic values and practices and identifying steps we can take toward making them real in our congregations and our nation. The study/resolution process itself is an exhibit of what democracy looks like. Let us briefly consider the steps. First members of the Unitarian Church in Victoria called for the study process. The two year study proposal was then reviewed and approved by the vote of delegates at the 2003 AGM [Annual General Meeting] representing all Unitarian congregations in Canada. Next, the Victoria group, in particular, pursued its study and as a result drafted four resolutions on democracy covering principal areas of concern: “Democracy in Everyday Life,” “Democracy in Government,” “Democracy in Our Congregations,” and “Democracy and the Role of the Media.”

These draft resolutions were then distributed to all Unitarian congregations in Canada for review, discussion and amendment; which did indeed take place, in January and March, in this congregation by those of us who decided to participate in the process. And I want to thank members of our Social Justice Committee for holding study and amendment sessions and those UCV members who attended the Extraordinary General Meetings last month where the draft resolutions were discussed, reviewed, and amended.

All amended drafts were then returned to the Victoria group for rewording and rewriting in their penultimate form. Three more steps and we’re done. The four resolutions will be presented next month at the AGM for

final review and amendment by delegates from across Canada. From that meeting, the CUC will establish a Democracy Monitoring Group charged with the task of lobbying government and the media to promote democracy within their spheres of action, and preparing educational materials on democracy for congregations to implement in their RE programs, their social justice projects and in their worship services. The last step is up to us to see that follow through in worship, education and action.

I know this is no panacea. No final remedy for what ails us and this society. But it is something, not nothing. And it expresses and strives to make real what we say we believe, and how and by what means we seek to achieve our most deeply held values. It is an expression of our conscience and our trusting fellowship; a call to remember and to reassert our values. It is a timely, needed expression of our concerted will to study, deliberate, participate, and act on a virtue, a disposition and a practice that all of us know is essential to the flourishing of each and every one of us and of the interdependent web of which we are a part.

May we recommit our selves this day to that mundane and sacred virtue of democracy, in word and in deed.

May it be so.