

Covenant of Democracy

Rev. Kate Rohde

April 13, 2008

It was 9:00 a.m. on a cold Saturday morning. The Nebraska Democratic Party was slated to hold caucuses for the first time to choose the presidential nominee. They were to begin at 10:00 a.m. Our caucus site was only two blocks away so my husband David, my father and I were slowly finishing our breakfast when I looked out the window and saw the street in front of our house beginning to fill up with cars. I realized that if my 85 year old dad, who uses a walker, was going to participate we were going to have to get to the school immediately. David dropped us off at the caucus site and we hurried in to get my dad a place to sit down. With 45 minutes to go, the grade school auditorium was almost two-thirds full and lines to get signed up were long. Soon people were waiting in the cold. We were shoulder to shoulder in the auditorium. By the time David parked the car and returned, we were lost in the crowd. The officials on the stage of the grade school auditorium looked a little dazed and confused. The auditorium was full and people were in the halls all around the building. At least four different people within my hearing quoted Will Rogers — “I don’t belong to an organized political party, I’m a Democrat!” Others, though, expressed pleasure and surprise that there were enough Democrats in Nebraska to fill the auditorium, much less this many in the neighborhood.

It was hot and I was feeling a little faint, but the spirit of camaraderie in the crowd was palpable and a friendly woman nearby handed me a part of her newspaper to use as a fan. We began to chat, as did others around us. All of us were there in that hot place for hours without much going on beyond chatting with the strangers with whom we were packed shoulder to shoulder. Yet there was a sense of excitement and unusual patience. No one left. It was messy and disorganized, but somehow, finally, the process was carried out. The people were polled and delegates were apportioned between the two candidates. Most people left at that point. We had spent two or more hours packed together like animals in a boxcar but I decided to stay for the last task — the selection of the delegates who would represent us and our candidate at the state convention. Those who were interested in being delegates (and we had about five times as many people interested as there were slots) had to give a two minute impromptu speech.

There were all kinds of people: an African-American college student, an Asian-American teacher, a Latino soldier, a European-American nurse, a Jewish mom with her two little kids hanging off of her, an elderly blue collar worker, and an Italian-American boy voting for the first time. Each of them spoke. They said a few words about themselves and then spoke about their hopes for their country and the other people in it. A nurse spoke about her hopes for her patients, especially the children without health care. A teacher spoke about his students. A soldier talked about his friends still in harm’s way. There was something about these people’s simple truthfulness and eloquence, the hopefulness, the dreams for a better life for others, and the desire to be a part of the next step in the democratic process, that made my eyes well up and a lump come into my throat. It felt like the very best Sunday morning in church. I couldn’t help but think that a moment like this was what Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, Washington, and

all the rest had in mind when they stopped believing in the Divine Right of Monarchs and decided to experiment with having faith in Democracy, to trust the people rather than the king.

Our country was a grand experiment which, though many of the causes for rebellion were secular ones, came out of an Enlightenment philosophy mixed with Protestant religion. The founders spoke of Nature's God who endowed each of us with inalienable rights. They said we all were created equal. They pledged not their honor but their sacred honor — the honor given them by God and now inherent within them. Throughout our history, the men and women whose eloquence about our country has moved us most — Lincoln, Martin Luther King, John Kennedy — have used language and metaphors which spoke to a spiritual connection between us as citizens in a democracy and which called us to a higher purpose.

And yet it is fashionable to be cynical. After all, three-quarters of the people who came to the caucus on that snowy Nebraska day could not have voted in the time of Washington. We would not have been rich enough, or male enough, or pale enough. And as we look back at the people whose words have inspired in us a reverence for democracy, we can see numerous flaws not only in their character, but in their living up to the ideals of the equity they espoused. Some were slaveholders, others were bigoted. None of the men we uphold treated women with full equity. Once it was fashionable to make icons of great leaders. Now it is the norm to dismiss them for falling short of their ideals and ours. We fail to credit them for having ideals greater than themselves, which have helped move us beyond them.

We also live in a time when secular media fosters a cynicism about democracy. Elections are portrayed as being about tactics, about victories and defeats, not about ideas, hopes for the future, or the direction of the nation. Those who run for office are portrayed as being motivated by power, by greed, or by venality rather than by a desire to serve, by idealism, or by a hope to better the community, the state, or the nation. We voters are pictured as being motivated by self interest, mostly our economic self interest, rather than by our hopes for our country, for our fellow citizens, or for our children. Fifty years ago religion in the public sphere, the civil religion at public functions, was something that was seen to bind us together across sectarian lines. Now religion is used to divide us. Religious figures that are given national airtime are those on the extremes: the Hagees, the Falwells, and the Robertsons. Even the irreligious figures who gain media attention, the atheists like Hitchens, Dawkins, etc., are equally strident and intolerant. In the past quarter century the forces of cynicism and division, sometimes driven by the secular media craving conflict and sensation and higher ratings, sometimes driven by intolerant voices of rightwing religion and leftwing skepticism, sometimes driven by the schemes of unscrupulous politicians, have divided the nation and frustrated our deep longings for working across divisions towards the common good.

Upon hearing that the theme of our Unitarian Universalist spring conference was to be "Rebuilding a Faithful Democracy", a number of Unitarian Universalists expressed dismay. I expect that they were dismayed because they remember the Jeffersonian

principle of walling off the state from the church and the church from the state. They are rightly dismayed at the ways in which the current administration and others before it have chipped away at that principle and used sectarian passions for political purposes. Yet, it is Unitarian Universalists who, as scholars and practitioners, have pointed out that a non-sectarian faith underlies the foundations on which our country was created. It was Minnesotan Sidney Mead, one of the foremost historians of religions and President of our UU seminary in Chicago in the mid-20th century, who described the United States as being a nation with the soul of a church.

What did he mean? As you look at our history, our founders believed in a separation between the church and the state because they felt that it would forestall the struggles between various sects and because they believed in religious liberty. However, nearly all were quite clear that religion and the moral precepts that religion taught were essential to democracy. They neither said, nor meant to say, that faith and morality should not play a key role in voters' decisions nor that faith would not be key to our fidelity to the principles of democracy.

While many of our founders were known in their day, and indeed would be known in ours, as unconventional in their personal religious beliefs and habits (Washington avoided communion, Jefferson cut up the bible and removed the parts he disagreed with) they all used not only the language of faith but also ideas drawn from their Enlightenment tinged Protestantism to ground themselves and the nation, both in the founding documents and in public utterances. In their writings, and in Washington's farewell address to the nation, they emphasized the necessity of religion and morality to the health of democracy. Indeed, many felt that the religious pluralism of colonial America, so unlike Europe, a pluralism where Jews, Catholics, Anglicans, Calvinists, Quakers, Congregationalists, and numerous other Protestant sects coexisted with little sectarian strife, was the impetus to a more democratic, less authoritarian, view of appropriate political power. Indeed it was British Undersecretary of State William Knox who worried aloud about American Protestant diversity that "Every man being thus allowed to be his own pope, he becomes disposed to wish to become his own king."

Both the Enlightenment ideal of a society in which people chose to be together in a social contract for the common good, and the religious idea of a society based on a covenant, a mutual promise to each other and to God, an idea particularly strong amongst the Puritans and the Pilgrims, formed the underpinnings of the ideal of this new country, the ideal of a country where free people had a strong union based on mutual promises and the duties imposed by promises, by a covenant, not by a king. It would be a union not imposed from above, but mutually promised by consent and promising liberty of conscience, recognition of innate rights, equity, and a mutual devotion to the common good, all philosophical ideals with religious roots. So, too, was the idea that truth came through the open clash of ideas and thus ideas should not be constrained by the state and the belief that commoners had access to that truth and should therefore have the right to self government rather than authoritarian rule. These ideas are so much a part of those of us brought up in this country that we fail to recognize that these are, in their essence, faith statements.

A few years ago, a young nephew, who had been brought up without any grounding in faith or particular moral teachings, was searching for that grounding. Visiting my family, he claimed that he could see no purpose in voting. He said that he was living for his own welfare and that the time and effort it takes to vote was highly unlikely to benefit him. We told him about all the ways in which government affects his life. He acknowledged that. I told him the story about the time that I had at the last minute decided to go in and cast an absentee ballot and that one vote had swung a city council election and my councilwoman became the swing vote on the council. He looked at me with pity. Well, someone wins the lottery, too, but it is a poor investment to buy a ticket on such a slim chance. Logically, he was correct. From the standpoint of pure individualistic self interest there is no reason for any particular individual to vote. Participation in the democracy process requires a belief in something more than one's own practical needs. Yes, we hope we make a difference, but honesty compels us to admit that individually, we don't. To participate we have to think of something larger than ourselves. Until my nephew admits to be grounded in something greater than himself, he will not be convinced.

For most of us who, unlike my nephew, are willing to admit that we care about the well-being of others, participating in democracy means that we believe in doing something that may work for the common good. For some of us that means finding a person we believe in, a candidate superior in her or his ability to bring about a positive outcome.

In this era, though, it is hard to base one's faith in democracy on politicians. Unlike many, I don't think this is because people who go into government are generically morally deficient or incapable. It is fashionable to magnify and exaggerate the flaws of those in power. Yet politicians and government are as good or bad as we are. I have met a lot of people in political life, from school board members to U.S. Senators. Some are dumb as dirt, some are bigoted, and some are egoistic. But some are brilliant, some are idealistic, and many want to do the best thing for their community and their country. All of them are human and have quite a mixture of the noble and the mundane in their souls. I know.

About fifteen years ago, a couple of heavy hitters in local politics in the Pennsylvania town I lived in, came to me and asked me to run against the incumbent state representative, Elinor Taylor. They would help me. I didn't have to worry about winning because I wouldn't have a chance, but I could give her some opposition and articulate some important ideas and help make room for a more successful opponent in the future. Just one thing, they said, Elinor always likes to go after dirt on her opponents. Is there anything in your background that could be embarrassing to you? Well, you might like to think that a minister, even a Unitarian Universalist minister, would have an exemplary past, and for the most part I did. But hey! I lived through the 60's. I did inhale and I did a lot of other things I won't mention in public. While I doubted Elinor really had the financial resources or the need to dig up sins committed thirty years previous and thousands of miles away, still it gave me pause. Nowadays it seems it is not

only what the politicians herself does or says, it is something stupid her husband says, or even more farfetched, out of context snippets of what her preacher says. (If the latter is the standard now, anyone attending my church had best not aspire to politics.)

We all know that even our greatest politicians have had tremendous flaws. Even the very best will sometimes disappoint, perhaps profoundly. One part of rebuilding a faithful democracy is to give up the kind of dangerous innocence that tries to make iconic figures out of ordinary men and women and then publicly excoriates them when they fail to meet inhuman standards. Rebuilding a faithful democracy means giving up silly expectations and being willing to settle for voting for human beings, choosing human beings whose values, talents, wisdom, ability to learn, and character we believe best matches the challenges of the office they seek.

More deeply, though, rebuilding a faithful democracy means renewing our sense of duty to others. I live with two men, my husband and my father, who are passionately interested in politics, unusually well informed, and quite pessimistic about the likely outcome of most elections in which they participate. When I asked each of them separately why, if they have so little hope, they are so faithful in their participation, each separately told me essentially the same thing: it is their responsibility as a citizen of this democracy to participate. They receive the benefits and they accept the responsibilities of this country. Essentially, they said that participating is part of the covenant of democracy.

It is not just about voting or being well informed. My father, as a result of his experience in World War II, became passionately interested in creating structures that would prevent war. For sixty years he has put particular effort into this concern by being part of an NGO that works on the issues, by writing letters to the editor and congress, and by making financial contributions. In 1965 and for 40 years thereafter, he took a yearly and sometimes twice yearly trip to the nation's capital where, with others, he visited the men and women who serve in the House and Senate to talk with them about some bill or another he wanted them to sponsor or to vote for which would take us closer to the goal. I went with him a few years ago on one of his last trips. He was over eighty. The halls of Congress are a long walk at eighty. But after 40 years, there were people who knew him. A congresswoman from his home state came up and gave him a hug and complained to him about Donald Rumsfeld. A moderate Republican from Iowa, Jim Leach, invited him into his office even though he had no appointment. Everyone we visited listened respectfully and asked him intelligent questions. Still, after 40 years and only one or two small victories you might think he would say it was a waste of time. But that is not the way he sees it. The way he sees it, he is being faithful to democracy. The rest is not up to him, the rest is up to others and to God. He is doing his part. That is all he can do.

There are always reasons for despair, for apathy, for disillusionment. Yet we are all old enough to remember some wonderful and remarkable things. When I was young a black man couldn't eat in a restaurant in South Carolina. This spring a black man won a presidential primary there. When I was young it was legal to pay women less than a man for the same work, legal to discriminate against us in admission to schools and

professions, and legal to fire us if we refused sexual favors to our employers. The laws have changed dramatically for women.

When I was young no one ever dreamed that the Berlin Wall would be dismantled peacefully nor did they dream that apartheid in South Africa would be ended through a peaceable agreement between the white head of state and a black leader. When I was a child almost no one mentioned homosexuality aloud and even most liberals regarded it as a mental illness. No one dreamed that it would be so often viewed as just another way of being a family that some states would legally recognize gay couples and families. Experience says that there is much reason for despair and yet there is experience that favors hope. But it is not hoping that will renew democracy, it is we that renew democracy by being faithful to the duties of the covenant of democracy. It is we that renew democracy by renewing our commitment to its underlying principles. It is we that renew democracy by teaching our children and grandchildren both its moral and spiritual underpinnings and the practical duties they require. We must teach them that winning is not all. Caring for the common good and being faithful to the responsibilities of citizenship is as great a moral duty as any they face.

Perhaps we can show them, as my parents did for me when they took me with them to vote, what a wonderful ritual it is when people from all over our community, people of all ages, shapes, and colors, come together to participate faithfully, with no immediate rewards, to do something for each other and for this unfinished experiment that is our country. If they participate in this ritual year after year, perhaps they too will find that like any good ritual in service to a higher ideal one day, in some unexpected place like a grade school auditorium in Nebraska, they will feel that brief moment of transcendence, that moment which binds us together and feeds our inner spirit.