

THE HEART OF DEMOCRACY
Rev. Kit Ketcham, Nov. 2, 2008

We had launched our boat trip down the Grand Canyon at the Vermillion Cliffs, at Lee's Ferry, Arizona. It was about noon on that first day when we pushed out into the Colorado River and headed downstream, past the tall cliffs that mark the entrance to this 300 mile long geology lesson.

I've always been a person who likes diving down to the heart of things, in this case, the layers of rock laid down over millions of years of geologic history. Over the next three weeks, as the river took us deeper and deeper into the heart of the Canyon, our small party of boaters watched Earth's physical history revealed in the layers of rock that striped and colored the cliffs.

We had started out on the Kaibab Plateau, where the dusty white layer of sandy limestone looks much like a pesky bathtub ring, and during the next few days, descended through layers of time: the Toroweap Formation, Coconino, Hermit, and Supai layers, and the brilliant Redwall Limestone which is responsible for so much of the color that stains the walls of the Grand Canyon.

By the time we reached the Inner Gorge of the Canyon, we had traversed in our little rafts millions of years of Earth's formation and we still were far from the Center of the Earth.

Jules Verne, in his classic 1864 science fiction novel, depicted the Center of the Earth as a hollow place full of prehistoric animals and natural hazards, reachable through the interior passages of an Icelandic volcano.

This novel, "Journey to the Center of the Earth", written about the time that geologists were abandoning the literal biblical account of the creation of the earth, had the educational purpose of showing how the world looked millions of years ago, from the Ice Age to the dinosaurs, for Verne had carefully taken his explorers down through the layers of rock, showing the different creatures which inhabited each period in geologic history.

Humans have always speculated about the true heart of the earth and our scientists' investigations have revealed it as a molten core of liquid iron and other minerals, alive and acting upon the body of the earth keeping it in a state of constant metamorphosis, with earthquakes, eruptions, and other seismic events, affecting weather patterns through its effect on sea currents, and thereby impacting our lives every day.

All living organisms seem to have a living core which keeps the organism going, keeps its internal systems healthy, makes it possible for the organism to interact with other organisms and produce communities--of bacteria, of families, of forests and pods and gardens and the myriad of beings co-existing interdependently on the earth.

You and I have hearts as our living core, the most important organ in our bodies, for without it we die. When my brother was so ill a few months ago, living on the energy produced by a battery pack which he lugged around with him constantly as his own heart deteriorated, his family and friends became deeply aware of how essential a healthy heart is. And his heart transplant last summer has meant the return of his life. Without that new heart, he doubtless would be dead by now.

It's easy to see what keeps a living organism going---its heart is that mechanism which powers a body or a collection of cells which are shaped into diverse forms, from the smallest bacterium to the largest being.

It's not as easy to see what powers a living concept. Our theme today is "The Heart of Democracy" and I invite you to go with me as we follow the threads that lead us deeper and deeper into this concept which is so important in our lives, both as Americans on the brink of an election and as Unitarian Universalists who consider democracy to be a religious principle.

Our human bodies are the visible manifestation that something lies at our core. We feel, we bleed, we breathe, we think, we clearly are powered by some energy that is not visible on the surface. Our senses may go, we may lose much of our blood supply and even our intelligence but we are still alive. Even when we cease to breathe, we may still be alive. Even when our heart seems to have stopped, it may sometimes still be re-started.

What is the most visible manifestation of democracy? I would say that it is probably the vote, the expression of one's opinion in an election, when the majority rules, when the greater body of voters decides how issues will be resolved or which candidates will take power or what ordinances will become law.

Yet we all suspect, I'd guess, that there is more to democracy than voting. So let's look for the layers beneath that visible manifestation of one person, one vote.

As a sidebar, let me mention that it's a feature of our representative democracy that we do not vote directly on every issue that confronts us as Americans. We instead vote for our representatives, those women and men whom we expect to do their best to provide a stable and just nation for us to live in. We expect them to have the best interests of our nation in mind as they do their work. We are, because of that, a republican (small R) democracy.

Because we are at least one step out in the process for many issues that directly affect us, we can hardly consider our representatives in Congress to be the heart of democracy. They are a feature which makes it easier to get things done, like the kidneys or the liver, but democracy would not die without elected representatives.

Going back to the idea of "one person, one vote" let's look more deeply at this feature of democracy. What is underneath this particular feature? It showcases the real or purported power and influence of one person and one person's conscience and ability to speak one's own truth. Where does this power come from? Is there a pathway here to the heart of democracy, like Jules Verne's passage through that Icelandic volcano to the center of the earth?

This powerful feature is right in line with our UU principles, particularly our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Yet we have seen the very public corruption of this facet of the democratic process. We have seen the immoral character of some of our representatives smeared across the headlines of our media. We have seen people accused fairly and unfairly of heinous acts. We have seen the votes of our representatives bought and paid for by corporate interests. We have seen individuals in our communities talked into voting against their own best interests by leaders who have only personal self-interest in mind.

So no matter how inherently worthy and dignified we may be as individuals, the truth is that our power and influence as individuals is limited in its sphere. We are free to vote as we will, but our influence and power are negligible unless we form coalitions and associations with others to strengthen our position.

The history of democracy is a checkered one at best. Non-democratic or quasi-democratic nations hold elections, yes, in lip service to the idea of "one person, one vote", but in reality, there is often no choice of candidates, no real way to effect change in the nation. There may be only one party of candidates. There may be threatened violence to dissenters. There may be coups which overthrow one elected regime in favor of another. This is especially true in formerly colonized nations. And there is a great deal of controversy world-wide about how to bring about a better democratic process in non-democratic and quasi-democratic nations.

There is controversy in our nation about whether our voting process is corruption-proof and a good deal of concern about how to include every eligible voter, how to handle voter fraud, and how to increase voter participation. If "one person, one vote" is to be meaningful, every voice must be heard and counted. When millions of people face losing their vote because of faulty procedures or outright corruption, "one person, one vote" doesn't mean much.

An informed and fully-franchised electorate is not the heart of democracy, though we are making progress in our journey to the center of the earth, excuse me, the center of democracy.

The layer beneath the electorate is conscience, I believe, a sure sense of right and wrong, a desire to speak one's truth and not to be "bought", not to be inveigled into wrong thinking, not to give in to selfish interests, but rather focused on the greater good.

Our conscience, at its best, looks past its own point of view, looks for what will maintain not only healthy humane life for all beings but health for communities as well. Conscience is aware of both one's privilege and one's responsibility.

But however keen our conscience may be, it is not easy to exercise conscience if one does not have the freedom to do so.

Perhaps the layer beneath conscience might be individual freedom and next to it, a recognition and acknowledgement of that freedom. If we are unaware of our individual freedom or if we are prevented from acknowledging it, like those in oppressed conditions, we are not free.

So freedom may be the heart of democracy, and recognition and acknowledgement of that freedom may be its activating force. Without individual freedom and awareness of that freedom, democracy will surely expire, as it has time and again in oppressive regimes.

Now, we may have dived down to the Heart of Democracy, but I don't want to stay there. An active and healthy body does not strictly rely on heart function. It relies on the interdependence of organs, tendons, bones, blood, the many body parts which together make our bodies fully functional. Like our physical bodies, Democracy relies on more than individual freedom.

This past week, I spent three days with my UU colleagues in ministry, a little R&R time for sure but also an opportunity to talk about how we are together, how we support each other, how we care for each other and for each other's ministries with respect and assistance.

Our purpose was to create a collegial covenant together and we spent hours talking about what it means to have a covenant. And this is where I want to draw our attention today because it relates to the heart of democracy.

Our UUCWI affirmation contains the word "covenant" as does the charter of the UUA. "This is our great covenant", we say every Sunday, "to dwell together in peace, to speak truth in love, and to help one another." And our denomination is founded upon principles that we covenant to affirm and promote.

A covenant is not a contract. It is not a business arrangement. Instead, it is an act of mutuality, of consent and promise, of obligation to one another, of shared destination, of shared affection. It is living, renewable, sustainable, reciprocal. It empowers us to reach out to one another. It clarifies assumptions about our roles within the community.

When we have created our mutual covenant as colleagues, it will probably read something like this, which is the covenant of the Iroquois Chapter of the St. Lawrence District:

*Mindful of our common calling,
conscious of our need to be together and
inspired by our commitment to Unitarian Universalism,
we covenant:
to share our stories
to nurture our spirituality
to minister to one another
and to celebrate our life together.*

This is a covenant among ministers. It says, in effect, that we will take care of each other, that we will cherish our time together, that we understand what it means to have a calling to ministry, that we are mutually committed to our faith, and that our relationships with each other are important and worthy of nurture.

Just as democracy is less than healthy if all its parts are not working well or are not working together, a community's health is enhanced by a covenant which speaks to our life together.

The late Unitarian Universalist minister Napoleon Lovely once wrote: "The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom". A covenant based on shared affection helps to insure the freedom of all in the community.

When we are in a covenantal relationship, we promise to each other that we will care for one another, that we wish to live in peace with one another, that we will give and receive freely, that we will speak our truth with love and respect, that we will say yes when asked for help. These are all religious acts, spiritual disciplines, the promise of a covenantal relationship.

It is not always easy to be in a covenantal relationship, as those of you who have been married, who are still married or in a longterm loving relationship, can attest. Very few covenants, even marriage covenants, are written down anywhere but in our hearts, and the assumptions about the covenant between partners or in a community can be wildly inaccurate. Those of us who are no longer married can attest to that one!

A covenant is dependent on trust, on a shared sense of purpose, shared affection, and a mutuality of obligation. It is most successful when it is publicly affirmed and written down somewhere besides just our hearts.

I am hoping that in the next year or two, we will do some thinking together about our shared covenant, examining our Sunday affirmation to see if it says everything that we have and are together, and including a statement of our mission, our shared purpose in this larger community.

Let me end with a story which I think acknowledges our shared, but mostly unspoken, covenant together and perhaps points up the wisdom of making our covenant explicitly known to one another.

Last spring, leaders in our congregation became interested in taking a stand on an important issue in our world: the issue of torture and its illegality, its cruelty, and its uselessness. This is a First Principle issue, for torture degrades and abases human worth and dignity.

To determine the level of support in the congregation for placing a banner on our property stating "Torture is a Moral Issue", a poll was taken via email and many positive responses were received. No negative responses emerged at that time, but after the banner went up, we discovered that several people in the congregation had not been aware that there was a poll and a few were unhappy---not because they believed torture was a good thing but because they felt it unwittingly sent an anti-military message and this was hurtful to our military families and would likely discourage new military families from feeling welcome here.

It wasn't immediately possible to resolve this situation but we vowed to do so as soon as we could schedule a meeting in our new building, and a couple of weeks ago, 15 or so people met here to talk about how to address the issue of the banner.

The conversation was respectful, passionate, and gradually a mutual understanding emerged: that the language of the banner was the sticking point, that a new banner's language would read: "Torture: End it Now!". I was in awe as I saw this happen. I hadn't known what to expect. I had hoped for a peaceful outcome, but to find this level of cooperation and understanding of other points of view was remarkable.

I saw our dissenters speaking their truth in love. I saw our supporters of the original banner hearing the pain of the dissenters. I saw the group striving for a mutual resolution that met the needs of both sides. I saw two sides come together in respect and affection. I saw people who had been uncomfortable expressing dissent speaking freely, no longer so afraid that their truth was not welcome.

I heard and saw love in the room, a caring for others, a desire for peace, a sharing of purpose. I saw a sense of freedom and of relief that we can create growth out of differences of opinion.

We affirmed our spoken and unspoken covenant together that night. And I was pleased. And those attending were pleased. And I believe the Universe was pleased as well.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

HYMN: #168, One More Step

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we are here together in love, that we shape our lives by giving and receiving love, and that we share a common purpose, to increase love and justice in our world. May we find ways to do this in our everyday lives, in our work, and in our play. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.