

“In Shared Power”

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In planning for this sermon about democracy, I wrestled with two contrary impulses.

One impulse was to outline all the really, horrible, terrible stuff that’s happening to silence the voices and rights of whole groups of people. For example, I read yesterday that due to a new school policy requiring students to play roles aligned with the gender assigned them at birth, a [transgender high school](#) student in Texas was kicked out of a leading role in the school play. Or, as you may have heard, Massachusetts hit the newly imposed limit for accepting families into the emergency shelter system. It’s hard to vote when you do not even have an address, let alone a clear path to citizenship. Also, in the wake of the ongoing violence in Israel and Palestine, the number of antisemitic and anti-Muslim attacks have dramatically risen in recent weeks. With ever slur and act of violence, ideas of who does and does not belong in the “we” fight for dominance.

But perhaps there is another direction this sermon on democracy and shared power could go. Perhaps amidst all the immense brokenness we also need to be reminded of the beauty of the world—the shared moments of intimacy, the laughter with strangers, the arc of bird flight across the expanse of blue sky. Perhaps we need renewed faith in the gifts found in shared community, in seeking to build communities where each person feels valued and seen. Perhaps what we need now is less about how awful the world is, but rather assurance there is something worth working towards or even fighting for with our one precious life.

Yesterday’s recognition of Veteran’s Day asked us to remember those who have risked their life in military service—many for principle, some as their best option for work. Because of my gender, my age, and the financial support of a middle-class family, I have never had to seriously weigh whether to join the military. But, perhaps like many of you, I have family who have been in the military and fought in wars.

Both of my grandfathers fought in World War II. My paternal grandfather, Zane, rarely mentioned his army service. Although the local VFW hall was named in part for his brother George who died in the war. Located in a rural Michigan community, that hall was the site of many family gatherings from big birthdays and anniversaries to a reception following my grandfather’s death. My other grandfather, Harold, made military service a defining part of his life. A member of the elite [First Special Service Forces](#), Harold saw significant action in the war. They even made a movie about his unit—*The Devil’s Brigade*—with Hollywood leading men William Holden and Cliff Robertson. There’s a great photo of my grandparents

decked out in their 1968 finest for the world premiere at the Michigan Theatre in Detroit—not far from their Pontiac home.

After many decades of attending army reunions and proudly wearing all manner of clothing with his unit's famous arrowhead insignia, Harold died in 2008. My grandfather Zane died only a few years ago in 2019. Each year the numbers of those who fought in, supported, or lost a loved one in World War II dwindle. Soon they will all be gone.

I think about this generation a lot lately, this “Greatest Generation” as they are often called. Born to a nation still converting to electricity, they witnessed not only World War II, but also immense transformations in technology and society from the atom bomb and commercial air travel to the internet and electric cars. Yet many are gone now as we grapple with the rise of a new generation of authoritarian leaders—leaders actively crushing or dismissing dissenting voices. Leaders who, as propagandist scholar Jason Stanley suggests, use fascist tactics of “us and them” to solidify support.

On the day after the momentous 2016 election, I opened the sanctuary in the church I then served for those seeking a quiet space of reflection and prayer. A trickle of folks came through the door, including 94-year-old Mary, a veteran of government service during World War II. “I thought we fought this stuff already,” she said. Her words have continued to echo in my head in the ensuing years. On that day, I assured her that she had done her part to make the world better and safer for more people so that others would be free to respond and fight today. When I am feeling tired of all the awful in the world, thinking of Mary helps me to stay in the fight for a more just, equitable, and democratic world.

As I'm new here, I will take a moment to name my understanding of a church's role with politics. I am aware of the tax laws governing non-profits that require ministers and congregations to be non-partisan, to avoid endorsing a particular political party or candidate. However, congregations *may* engage in political lobbying efforts for *issues*, as long as such activities are a small part of the overall work of the church. (If you're interested, the UUA has a document [“The Real Rules”](#) available online that goes into a lot more detail about this.) However, my own feelings about the nonpartisan role of a minister in politics primarily emerge from my deep convictions about the purpose of a church.

In short, I believe that the purposes and concerns of a church are bigger than that of a government. A church calls us to our common humanity across all kinds of social divides, including the divide of political philosophy and party. A church calls us to the moral challenge of living ethically with others—choices which may or may not be covered by any law or governmental department. For example, it may not be illegal to refuse to let another car merge in front of you, but it can be a jerk move. *Practice kindness.*

I believe in remaining non-partisan as a minister and a church *because* I believe so deeply in the work of building communities where we can show up and be *loved*, where we can be seen as a person with dignity and worthiness, where we can make mistakes, disagree, and still, *still* seek to recognize our togetherness. We also *need* ways to make meaning out of our lives and to find ourselves within a larger story. And we just need other people to share in our joys and our wonder as well as our heartbreaks and confusion, even despair. Churches exist because we are more than our bank accounts, our jobs, our hobbies, and, yes, even our families, friends, book clubs, or military reunion groups. Even amidst the many headlines despairing over the decline of church attendance and shuttered buildings, I remain hopeful. Because I believe we are spiritual beings in need of purpose and meaning. As long as a congregation continues to ask how to effectively meet the spiritual needs of their time and location, I believe there remains a future for religious and spiritual community.

In short, a religious community helps us to wrestle with how to live ethically and meaningfully *with others*. This starts to get at the question of what can make democratic processes—and fighting fascism—*religious*.

Not *all* religious points of view support democracy. Some promote hierarchal power and assume inequality among persons. Still others only promote shared power *within* the group, but not more broadly in society. Unitarian Universalism states a commitment to democratic processes within congregations and society at large. As a tradition that affirms the dignity of all of us, the worthiness of each of us, it is a *religious* commitment to want to protect the individual voices of people. For a long time, this emphasis on the individual rights, a core element of religious and political liberalism, would have been the primary way to draw a line between religious commitments and the use of democratic processes. Giving each person a voice and vote affirms individual dignity and worthiness. Supporting democracy emerges from these religious commitments.

More recently, I have been reflecting on how other Unitarian Universalist values also inform our commitment to democratic processes. For example, Unitarian Universalism affirms our interdependence with each other and with the earth that sustains us. Living as we do within a web of relationships with others and the finite earth, we need to figure out how we are going to share finite space and resources.

Or maybe we don't. Maybe we don't *need* to share. Maybe we can tell ourselves a story about why some people—namely us—deserve more than other people. We might root this idea that we deserve more in a mythic story of a glorious past where people like us were thriving. Maybe if we keep telling this story to enough of the “right” people in enough different ways there will be a critical mass of people who start to see the world the same way. We might even proclaim that we are the victims who had our way of living in the past

robbed from us. Anxious to protect our group, we could insist on law and order, especially against those we see as deviant from the story we tell about the “right” way of living. Yes, maybe we don’t need to share. Maybe what we really need is a system that protects the deserving, even at the expense of the freedom and well-being of others.

No, we don’t *need* to share. We don’t *need* to believe in equality or shared power. Not everyone does. Do you?

What we believe about the fundamental nature of humanity impacts how we work together to share power or not. Like Mary and others of the Greatest Generation once faced, I believe we again are asked to fight the rise of fascist tactics and authoritarian leaders. To join this fight, we need not join the military—maybe we even choose to actively protest military action as an answer. Our resistance to fascism begins by cultivating empathy for others, which can start with the people here beside you today. Living out our values of interdependence, dignity, and worthiness can begin by how you show up here, at home, or with your colleagues. Part of a church’s purpose, I believe, includes being a laboratory for how to work together, how to support one another’s voices, and how to recognize our need of and impact upon each other.

In the epilogue to his book *How Fascism Works*, Jason Stanley asks how we maintain a common sense of humanity and empathy for others. While fascist tactics would seek to scapegoat and divide us, the use of inclusive democratic processes aim to share power across difference. No one person or even one group holds the whole story of humanity. Rather, we should resist myths that purport to help “us” by denouncing “them.” As Stanley writes,

By refusing to be bewitched by fascist myths, we remain free to engage on another, all of us flawed, all of us partial in our thinking, experience, and understanding, but none of us demons.

None of us demons; each of us flawed humans. These are our circumstances for learning to work together within an interdependent web of relationships with friends, family, church members, neighbors, and strangers. How we choose to show up and share power—or not—is not just a political choice, it is also a choice rooted in religious beliefs and values.

My prayer is that we be a community that cultivates empathy, recognizes the togetherness of our common humanity, and accepts the flawed people each of us are. Such communities—at the congregational, state, national, and international level—might just be worth fighting for. What do you think?