

Vote Your Values
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on November 4, 2018

The reading Carolyn just shared with us speaks clearly and directly to what is occurring in our country today. As we sit and consider these words by Parker Palmer we might think they were written just recently. We could think that but we would be incorrect. The book this reading comes from was published in 2011. When Palmer was penning these words things were considerably different than they are now. What he was writing then was definitely true back then, but they were no where near as true or as pronounced as today. As we hear his words this morning, they could seem prophetic, as if he was speaking about the future we now live in.

I know that many of you, like myself are gravely concerned about the issues that Parker Palmer addresses in this reading. And I know that many of you, like me and like Palmer, want to reverse the direction our country seems to be headed in—the direction that foments fear, that amplifies anger, that heightens hatred and that incites and vindicates violence. The reading implicates media personalities first and foremost for the part they play in what is going on. Today, however, the preeminent purveyors of such perspectives are not media personalities. Today it is a select group of those in elected office along with the people they appoint to administrative posts who are leading the charge.

The significant shift in who is leading us down this path is important and alarming. This shift may also provides us with an opportunity. You and I do not have the ability to determine which media personalities get air time. We do, however, have a say about who is in political office. The opportunity I am referring to occurs on Tuesday, Election Day. On Tuesday we get to participate in determining who our elected officials are. In the 48 years since I cast my first ballot on Election Day, this year feels like the most important election I have ever participated in. So today I stand before you and encourage you, no, I implore you, to vote.

I want to be clear that I am not going to tell you who to vote for. Instead, I want you to vote your values. And I would ask you to think of the Seven Principles of our UU faith as you are reviewing candidates and contemplating how they match up with your values. The very act of voting is a way each of us can enact one of our Principles. Our Fifth Principle calls us to “affirm and promote:...the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” This Principle makes voting not just a civic right and responsibility, it makes it a religious act as well.

I knew that voting was a right before I ever cast my first ballot on Election Day. It wasn't until some years later that I became aware that voting is a privilege. There are significant numbers of citizens in this country whose right to vote has been or will be revoked or denied. This fact makes it even more imperative for me to act on my right and my privilege and to cast a ballot with those folks in mind. I must keep them in mind because our First Principle instructs us to “affirm and promote:...the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” And our Second Principle calls us to “promote:...justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” If those who are seeking elected office are intent on promoting agendas that are counter to these values, I feel compelled to vote— to vote for the benefit of those who are denied the opportunity.

I recognize that I am preaching to the choir this morning. In the years I have been actively engaged with Unitarian Universalism I have found that Unitarian Universalists are typically very invested in voting, even if it is about what kind of lightbulbs to put in the sanctuary. And I have noticed that many UU's invest considerable time and energy becoming informed about candidates for political office as well as other issues that are on the ballot. What I am uncertain about is the foundational criteria upon which we, as individual UU's, make decisions to vote for or against a candidate or an issue.

My uncertainty arises both from personal experience as well as scientific research on how people make decisions. Numerous research studies have shown that people make decisions based on all kinds of criteria. It may be beneficial for us to consider a few of these criteria as we consider how to vote.

The first criteria I would ask us to consider is loyalty. I recall first really thinking about loyalty when I became a Boy Scout and began learning the Boy Scout Law. Loyalty is the second of twelve character traits listed in that Law. A person can have loyalty to a person, to a group or organization, or to a particular set of values. I imagine many of you are aware that a significant number of people vote a straight party ticket. Doing so can be an example of voting first and foremost out of loyalty. I want to be clear here, a person may vote a straight party ticket and still be voting their values. Loyalty, after all, can be a value. That said, the more candidates there are on the ballot, the higher the likelihood that voting a straight party ticket indicates that the single value of loyalty is more important than any or all other values. We may want to think about this as we prepare our ballots.

In our reading Parker Palmer speaks to another criteria that can factor into a person's decisions and actions. That criteria is the pursuit of personal gain, either real or perceived. I am sure all of you have heard the saying that in politics what matters most is the economy. Basically what that saying is asserting is that people vote their pocketbook. Clearly economic wellbeing is and deserves to be a value. But when we value our own financial status above all else, then that value is shallow and it is selfish. With the economy booming, we shall see whether personal prosperity is the dominant value that some political pundits make it out to be.

Another factor that can play a part in our decision making when deciding on a candidate is prejudice. Whether we are aware of our prejudice or not, we all hold inaccurate, preconceived notions about something or someone. When such inaccurate, preconceived notions are generalized around such issues as race, religious affiliation, age, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation, cultural heritage, temporary mental or physical ability, or economic status, we are dealing with prejudice. Prejudice is something all of us need to be on the lookout for because it is frequently not something we are consciously aware of in ourselves. Scientific researchers sometimes use the phrase "unconscious biases" when they write about the prejudices we react from and make decisions upon. My experience has taught me that a safe and supportive environment is needed if we are going to explore and discover these prejudices as well as the attitudes and beliefs that underpin them. My intention is to do all I can to insure that UUFB offers such an environment.

These are just three of many possible criteria we might use in making decisions about how we will vote. In the midst of writing about these criteria I began to question myself. Is it really necessary to bring up things like loyalty, personal gain, prejudice and

unconscious bias with these folks? These people are intelligent, good hearted, and dedicated, These people share my values. Then I took a long, slow breath and looked deeply into myself. As I began to exhale that breath I asked myself the following questions. Has loyalty ever been the deciding factor in my ballot decision? Have I ever voted with perceived or real personal gain as my prime motivator? Has prejudice or unconscious bias ever been a factor in my choice of candidates? As I sat with these questions I recalled how, in my early life, my mother would tell me how important it is to be honest. With her voice filling my mind a simple and clear answer became apparent. The answer to at least one and possibly all of those questions is yes. It may be that I am the only person in this room who has at one time or another let such criteria determine how I voted. Then again, some of you may have answered yes to one or more of these questions just like I did. If you did, then what I have just shared may be beneficial as we cast future ballots.

By late Tuesday evening or early Wednesday morning we will know most if not all of the election results. I am reasonably certain that I will be happy with some outcomes and disappointed or even distressed with others. That has been my experience with almost every Election Day outcome since I cast my first ballot so many years ago. But over the course of those many years I have continued to believe in the democratic process. And I have learned that even though I have done my duty by casting my ballot, my work isn't done. Over the years I have come to realize that voting on election day is just one of the many opportunities I have to vote my values.

Here are a few examples of the opportunities I am referring to. I have learned that I can make my values known to my elected officials by calling or writing them about specific issues. When I contact them on issues I am letting them know that how they vote will play a significant role in whether or not they get my vote next Election Day. I can also write articles or letters to the editor for the newspaper that state the values I believe we all need to consider when making decisions that impact the lives of others. I learned yet another way to vote my values shortly after the first Election Day I was able to cast a ballot. That was in 1970 during the Viet Nam war. When my vote at the ballot box didn't make the difference I had hoped for, I voted in a different way. I voted by attending demonstrations and marches. It took several years but those marches and demonstrations made a profound difference. In my time as your minister I have attended a number of marches and demonstrations with a good number of you. When we join together in solidarity, we let those in office know that our voices, and our votes, matter. And we let them know that they disregard our values at their peril. We can also vote our values when we shop. How and where we spend our money has a significant influence not only on businesses but on politicians as well. Economics is important and each dollar we spend can be a vote that expresses the values that matter most to us.

I share these other ways of voting our values because I know that many of you, like me, have been heartbroken of late with the political situation in our country today. I believe Parker Palmer identified what is at the base of our current political situation when he stated, "The human experiences that these manipulators so skillfully exploit is heartbreak, plain and simple." Later in the book he writes, "Their success reveals what we get when we fail to understand our own heartbreak and do what is required to heal it."

In this room and across this country there is a tremendous amount of heartbreak, heartbreak that is raw and unhealed. It is essential that we acknowledge that heartbreak and commit ourselves to working together to address it. Voting our values is one way to address the heartbreak that so many people feel. But we need to do more than just vote our values. We need to acknowledge and address the heartbreak with those who gather together here and also with those we encounter beyond these walls. We need to do this to help heal our country and our democracy. We need to do this to maintain and build hope for the future of our democracy. Here is how Parker Palmer views the task that lies before us.

Despite our sharp disagreements on the nature of the American dream, many of us on the left, on the right, and in the center have at least this much in common: a shared experience of heartbreak about the condition of our culture, our society, our body politic. That shared heartbreak can build a footbridge of mutual understanding on which we can walk toward each other.

Our sharpest disagreements need not be the seeds of democracy's destruction. If we know how to hold their tensions in ways that open our hearts, they can become proof of democracy's genius and drivers of its renewal.

If Palmer is correct, our task is not so much to change minds as it is to listen to, to comfort and to heal the pain of heartbreak. If we are going to heal the heartbreak that surround us, we need to consciously and continually enact and enable our Second Principle which instructs us to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Our work, my friends, is cut out for us. Let us get to that work, that the values contained in our Seven Principles may someday be a lived reality for all the people in this country.

So may it be.