

MAKE AMERICA GRACIOUS AGAIN: The Battle for the Souls of Americans

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church - St. Petersburg, Florida - 7/01/18

READINGS (texts below, after sermon)

<u>Gathering</u>	<i>UUA Covenant Affirmations 2, 4, and 6</i>
<u>Invocation</u>	<i>The Poor Ye Shall Always Have With Ye, Deuteronomy 15</i>
<u>Meditation</u>	<i>The American Testament (Declaration 1776, Preamble 1787 & Gettysburg 1863)</i>
<u>Reading #1</u>	<i>Freedom & Equality, <u>Vindication of the Rights of Women</u> by Mary Wollstonecraft</i>
<u>Reading #2</u>	<i>Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, by John Buehrens in <u>A Chosen Faith</u></i>

SERMON

A preschool teacher explained Independence Day to his class this way: “It’s a day we’re happy because we’re all free!” A little girl raised her hand and said, “But I’m not free.... I’m four.”

If the teacher had been a woman, we could have called her Ms. Communication. And what if that is the last civics lesson that child receives in her schooling?

This is a society-wide problem, isn’t it? What does Independence Day mean? What do we mean, free?

In 1969, Boston’s school system was being integrated, by busing impoverished black children to go to school with impoverished white children. I was co-director of a youth center in working class South Boston. I lived a block from the center in a housing project, along with my co-director Joe. Joe had recently left the Catholic seminary after six or seven years of study – but was surprisingly sane. The youth we served, all Irish or Polish immigrant stock, mainly lived in the project. They lived with a lot of anxiety - from their poverty, their families, their schools, the nuns, the priests, the corner gangs, the police, the future, and being teen-agers.

Lizzie was not untypical, with her cachet of young beauty and her disarray of self-doubt. Her family was struggling and erratic, but making it thanks to subsidized housing and both parents and two brothers working. Lizzie had a quick wit and the usual touch of cynicism that had the nuns on her case as the student most likely to be very lucky if she graduated and got a job as an office girl, which judgment she accepted faithfully.

But Lizzie was the one who pulled me out of the Youth Center one night and pushed me to stop the five policemen who were in the alley beating up one of our youth, a too-tough skinny fourteen year old who had just gotten out of the hospital after surgery, but evidently was identified by the police as needing a lesson. Lizzie looked out for everyone, it turned out. The more my co-director Joe and I talked with Lizzie, the smarter we realized she was. We finally went to the high school and talked with some of the nuns about some changes in her curriculum – and a year and a half later she entered Brandeis University with a full scholarship.

About two and a half years later, I was back in Boston after working overseas. One night, Lizzie came knocking on my apartment door, along with Rosie, her East Boston Italian scholarship roommate at Brandeis. Rosie had been raped at a party by a childhood friend of her brothers and she was pregnant. "Either she gets an abortion in New York," said Lizzie, "or she drops out of school two years short of graduation and has a baby. She doesn't have any money and she can't ask her family. But Planned Parenthood said they could help if she can get to New York."

The train was handy, so we got Rosie, along with Lizzie, to New York in a couple of days. They both graduated from Brandeis University and became devoted school teachers and made good marriages and happy families.

I love Planned Parenthood. Not that women should have power over men, said Mary Wollstonecraft - but that they should have power over themselves. And I think of the number of good influences there were on Lizzie's and Rosie's souls and what good, and perhaps even great, spirits grew up as they gained power over their lives.

For this morning's Independence Day sermon, initially I was thinking I'd start by addressing some news item likely to trouble our souls with anxiety like Lizzie experienced as a teenager facing her hostile world. From my files, maybe start with philosopher Mortimer Adler's warning for all Americans to study the foundational truths of what he called "The American Testament" – our scripture - the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, the Gettysburg Address.

Or maybe an article from last July by Vanderbilt Law School professor Ganesh Sitaraman arguing that the framers of the U.S. Constitution believed that democracy can work only if the political economy establishes no extremes of poverty and wealth among the people.

Or an article also from last July by Heather Gerken, dean of Yale Law School, begging America to adopt the fundamental law school methodology of recognizing the strengths in your opponent's position and the weaknesses in your own to help transcend enmity and injury.

Or an article from this past March by Katharine Hayhoe, professor and director of the Climate Science Center at Texas Tech University, about her success finding common ground with fellow Christians who deny human causation in climate change. Her starting point – everyone wants enough to eat, clean air to breathe, clean water to use, a safe place to live.

Or an article, also from this past March in which professor at Santa Clara University Law School Michelle Oberman notes that after the U.S. Supreme Court overturns the rights in Roe v. Wade, perhaps half the States would keep abortion legal and women with enough money and time could still get abortions, making essentially two laws – one of "Yes" for the wealthy, one of "No" for the poor.

Or, last month's news that our Immigration officials were separating parents from children without any due process – not unlike what I learned, while serving on the oversight board for

Florida's state family protective services in North Central Florida, that we do with many troubled American families in our social services system.

Or, ten days ago a column by psychologist Edward Renner on the 25% increase in suicide since 1998 and its correlation to Americans' significant loss of financial security during that time – the poorest 10% with a 60% income loss; the middle class with a minimum 17% income loss; the richest 10%, 19% richer at minimum; and 40 million Americans in poverty, 13 million of them children. We are trickling down.

Or, last week a column by winner of the 2006 National Book Award for Non-fiction and the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for journalism, Timothy Egan, noting that though President Trump has just claimed crime in Germany is “way up”, in fact Germany just recorded its lowest crime level in 30 years. And Egan wrote, “The constant repetition of the lie is the way to make the truth meaningless.... This,” he wrote, “is the case for many of the 3,200 lies or misleading claims that (President) Trump has uttered since taking office. ... How (then),” he asked, “is a fact-based democracy supposed to function?”

Or the next day a news report about the massive contributions to the Florida gubernatorial candidates from a few wealthy individuals, from the rich candidates themselves, and from the Chamber of Commerce and the Florida Industries Association.

But then the linchpin – and I use that word judiciously - U.S. Supreme Court swingman Justice Anthony Kennedy has just retired, leaving his seat for a more ideologically extremist justice to vote on all the above issues.

Anxiety – not unlike the daily life of Lizzie and her housing project peers.

What shall be our way?

In the book A Chosen Faith, former UUA president John Buehrens notes philosopher Martin Buber's observation that the ideals of the French Revolution - liberty, equality, and fraternity (or the kinship of all) – got corrupted over time - Liberty going West, becoming exploitation and Equality going East, becoming oppression. The ideal of fraternity, of kinship, of community, got lost in both – and until it is established, prophesized Buber, efforts to have freedom and equality will be in vain.

Caring community - could that be our way?

When I look back at the experiences of young Lizzie, I see that it was a little community that built around her and helped her up - a circle of caring close to kinship, giving her more equal means to fulfillment and the freedom that should have been unalienably hers by right - a circle of caring that she then helped expand through family and community. It is an American story. Shouldn't it be the American story?

Perhaps it is a model for responding to our anxieties about democracy, environment, and justice. Perhaps we can build by building little circles of decency. Perhaps grow past class war through spiritually compelling covenants of caring - not regulations and restrictions, but protections and empowerments. Perhaps progressive taxation and anti-trust protections, perhaps the rights to food, housing, work, health care, education, voting rights as fundamentals of liberty and necessary for life and the pursuit of happiness.

Perhaps recognizing economic power follows political power – and political power follows economic power. Perhaps no oppressing our souls with “one dollar/one vote,” but empowering all souls with “one person/one vote.”

Perhaps study our own American Testament and pursue its ideals and truths as if our lives depend on it. Perhaps name Independence Day for what it really is, a Declaration of Equal Rights to which we pledge our lives, our fortunes, our sacred honor. Perhaps democracy, not for a day, but for a life.

If we're not free, we are for... what? To borrow a rhetorical style, we're going to make America grateful again. We're going to make America gracious. Then we'll be free. Then, God bless America.

READINGS

Gathering *UUA Covenant Affirmations 2, 4, and 6*

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations..., the use of democratic process in our congregations and society at large.... and the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all

Invocation *The Poor Ye Shall Always Have With Ye, Deuteronomy 15*

**May we remember as if written in our hearts,
whoever is a member of our community is our neighbor,
to be cared for as we care for ourselves.**

And there will be no poor among us if only we obey this commandment:

That we be not hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward the needy;

That we open our hands to meet their needs, whatever they may be.

That we give freely and ungrudgingly,

For so the Being of beings will fill us and bless us in all we do.

And because there will always be some poor among us,

let us always keep open our hands and our hearts that we may thrive.

Meditation *The American Testament* (Declaration 1776, Preamble 1787 & Gettysburg 1863)

Reader #1: Take a deep breath, listen deeply, be aware of thoughts and feelings arising, let them go and return to listening deeply, aware of thoughts and feelings arising and letting go:

Reader #2: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness -- that to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among the people, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed ... to effect the people's Safety and Happiness.

Reader #1: We, the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish (the) Constitution (of) the United States of America.

Reader #2: Our nation is conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal —that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom— and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Reader #1 and All: Please repeat after me the parts of a last sentence, if you dare:

For the support of this Declaration,
with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence,
we mutually pledge to each other
our Lives,
our Fortunes
and our sacred Honor.

Now, if you would, let the words ring.

Reading #1 *Freedom & Equality, Vindication of the Rights of Women by Mary Wollstonecraft*

Make all women free and they will quickly become wise and virtuous - as men become more so - for the improvement must be mutual - or, the injustices which one half of the human race are obliged to submit to retorting on their oppressors, the virtue of man will be worm-eaten by the insect whom he keeps under his feet.... There must be more equality established in society, or morality will never gain ground - and this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on a rock if one half of humankind be chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continually undermining it through ignorance or pride.

Reading #2 *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, by John Buehrens in A Chosen Faith

In the beginning - wrote the great theologian and philosopher Martin Buber - at the time of the French Revolution, *liberty, equality, and fraternity* (what might better be called the *kinship of all*) became the hallowed ideals of modern Europe.

But after further revolutions in the West and East, the three diverged. Liberty went west, to America. But along the way its character changed. It became the freedom to exploit, to squander, to dissipate.

Equality went east, to the Soviet Union and later to China. It too degenerated, becoming the submergence of the individual in a faceless collective – at its worst the equality of the Gulag or that of the Red Guards....

Today, observed Buber, there are people in the West, such as Martin Luther King, who are struggling to reunite liberty with equality.... And there are people in the East, such as Lech Walesa, who are struggling to return equality to a companionship with liberty.

But neither effort can ever progress, much less succeed ... unless we remember the missing element, human kinship. Kinship can be recovered only by modern prophets who respect ordinary people, who will nurture, rather than exploit, their hopes and faith; by humble prophets who will dare to proclaim 'the prophethood of all believers.'