

“The First Home of Democracy”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmyt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading Excerpt from “Engagement” by Terry Tempest Williams¹

“The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up — ever — trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?...In the open space of democracy, we engage the qualities of inquiry, intuition, and love as we become a dynamic citizenry, unafraid to exercise our shared knowledge and power. We can dissent. We can vote. We can step forward in times of terror with a confounding calm that will shatter fear and complacency.”

Sermon

The basement of the United States Embassy in Tegucigalpa, Honduras is as sanitized and institutional feeling as one might imagine the basement of a government building to be. In March of 2019, I sat in the white-walled, gray-carpeted room in a plastic chair along with about fifty other Americans.

I was part of an interfaith pilgrimage to Honduras. We had traveled there to better understand the root causes of migration and to participate in actions of solidarity with Hondurans seeking to protect democracy, land, and water. We were at the U.S. Embassy to accompany a group of land and water protectors as they shared their stories with members of the United States Agency for International Development.

One of these environmental activists was Juan Antonio López. Don López was from the city of Tocoa in the northern region of the country. He was a devout Catholic whose liberation theology and belief in the preferential option for the poor motivated his activism.

¹ <https://orionmagazine.org/article/engagement/>

His community was being exploited by mining companies, who, with the complicity of the Honduran government, were violating environmental regulations to extract iron oxide from open pits in the region. The mining process contaminates the Guapinol and San Pedro rivers. It is the waters of these rivers that the indigenous Lenca community rely upon for drinking, fishing, and agriculture.

In a country where freedom of speech and protest has long been fragile, the activism of people like Juan López was risky. He and other community members had been publicly criticizing the local government for their corruption and failure to protect the public and, just over a week ago, had called for the resignation of the city mayor.

Early this past week, I learned that Juan López had been assassinated last Saturday night as he left an evening church meeting. The murder of activists has long been a tool of the powerful elite in Honduras, and to the heartbreak of all those who knew Juan López, he, too, had become a target.

I share this story partly to honor a commitment I made to myself after I returned from that pilgrimage five years ago to continue raising awareness of what is happening in Honduras especially as the political situation is one of the primary reasons people are migrating elsewhere including the United States.

I also share this story to highlight that we here in the U.S. are not alone in our struggle to maintain government by the people and the kind of democratic engagement upon which a democratic system of governance depends.

This system feels particularly frail right now. The conditions that support democracy are so turbulent and unsteady.

Media free from the influence of corporate and foreign powers.

Fair and impartial courts.

Peaceful campaigning.

Truth in speech.

Authoritarianism is on the rise globally, and the question of whether democracy will survive is not limited to our country alone.

This existential question rests upon many other questions about our civic life.

Can we uphold civil liberties, human rights, and dignity?

Can we engage in peaceful transfers of power?
Can we treat those with whom we disagree with respect?

I have heard many of you wondering about these questions, too, and especially about how we can move forward without breaking apart. So many of you are made weary by the us versus them mentality that so dominates public and private discourse and action.

Where these questions are being answered is not primarily in the halls of Congress or in the basements of embassies, but on the streets, besides the rivers, and in the living rooms where we, the actors of democracy, make our homes.

We work in concert with one another, like the parts of an ecosystem. Trees in a forest who each play a role along with the soil, air, insects, and birds.

The ecosystem of democracy includes:

- those who are willing to listen to a neighbor who shares an opinion you disagree with,
- those who check off voters' names as they arrive to city hall on election day,
- those who go door-to-door in support of their candidate, whoever that might be, to share their passion and perspective with others,
- those who write letters to the local paper to take a stance on housing policy or climate change legislation, and
- those who sit on a park bench with a neighbor and ignite one another's imaginations about how we can better use our public spaces.

One can find story after story of people who come together within the ecosystems of their communities, just like Juan López did, out of love for land and love for neighbor, to find solutions together to the problems they face.

Terry Tempest Williams writes about such an effort. Williams was living in Castle Valley in southeastern Utah in the Colorado River corridor in the early 2000s when an eighty acre swath of land being held in trust, was sold to a developer, without community input. Despite the developer assuring the community that the land was for private use, a for sale sign was hammered into the red desert soil within a week.

Quickly, a group of alarmed community members came together to start organizing. Williams describes this group as including "Mormons and ex-Mormons; Republicans, Democrats, and Libertarians; attorneys, carpenters, climbers, artists, teachers, and old hippies." Together they formed the Castle Rock Collaboration.

The day before bulldozers were set to clear the land an anonymous donor came forward and the collaboration was able to buy back the land from the developers. This was just the first act of this group. Soon they became a community with a shared imagination and vision. Over the next five years, they were able to protect over three thousand acres of land.

This experience taught Williams something about democracy and wherein lies the will and power to keep democracy alive.

She writes: “It is easy to believe we the people have no say; that the powers in Washington will roll over our local concerns with their corporate energy ties and thumper trucks. It is easy to believe that the American will is only focused on how to get rich, how to be entertained, and how to distract itself from the hard choices we have before us as a nation.

I refuse to believe this. The only space I see truly capable of being closed is not the land or our civil liberties but our own hearts.

The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up — ever — trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?”

Williams is asking some profound and fundamental questions here. Questions I know to be incredibly alive now twenty-some years after she posed them.

Can we be generous?

Can we listen with our whole beings?

Can we trust our fellow citizens to join with us in the pursuit of a living democracy?

The embrace of these questions is the place we start.

And, we cannot answer these questions alone in isolation from others.

The answering of these questions happens in our engagement with one another - human heart joining human heart.

It happens as we share aloud with one another our questions, our fears, our hopes, and our visions.

But, here’s the thing. We cannot join our hearts only with those with whom we agree, or who put up the same lawn sign we do.

The spiritual test of democracy is whether the “we” who comes together to answer these questions can encompass a Beloved Community of belonging, across and including people of diverse cultural backgrounds, ages, and political positions.

After all, as Maria J. Stephan and Julia Roig of the Horizons Project write: “Authoritarianism, like any oppressive system, thrives on divisions and disorientation.”

Elections put into sharp relief what is at stake in any given moment but, as people who are part of a living democracy, we are part of a much bigger project. To counter oppressive systems, we have to nurture the public space of belonging, the space in which democracy lives and thrives.

Joe Primo, Chief Executive Officer of Grateful Living writes: “Belonging is where dignity, the sacred, and redemption meet. It is where you can be wholly you while also being in relationship with those wildly different from you. Belonging is a both/and.”²

The danger right now is that othering rather than belonging has become a political strategy. One that promotes fear in the heart in the hope that fear will be disempowering.

Othering is so common that it is often assumed to be the default stance for any conversation we might enter into whether across the fence talking to a neighbor, across the podium at city hall, or in the comment section of a post on social media.

Othering is seductive in the short term, and corrosive over time. I know how easy it can be to slip into an othering stance. I feel it come on anytime I hear or read statements I find particularly abhorrent, anti-immigrant statements or dismissiveness about people who are unhoused, for example. It is easy for that voice to come out that questions the inherent goodness of anyone who might utter those words.

And, I also believe that to draw together for the common good, for equity and justice in our relations, we must practice radical belonging. We must stretch the arms of inclusion in all directions. And, we must live democracy inside out.

We must foster the kind of democracy we want in our own hearts first.

“The human heart is the first home of democracy.”

² Joe Primo, “Radical Belonging in an Age of Othering,” <https://grateful.org/resource/radical-belonging/>

More fundamental even than the question of whether democracy will survive, I believe, is the question of whether our human regard for one another will survive, whether our hearts can remain open and courageous.

Will our capacity to regard the other not as enemy but as kin survive?

Will the depth of belonging and interconnection beyond partisanship survive?

Can any of our democratic institutions survive if the roots of exclusion and othering remain in our hearts?

Enough of us, if not all of us, must keep alive a democracy rooted in belonging. In the ecosystem of an engaged public life, there must be a place for each of us.

A place to protect and to protest.

A place to listen in good faith.

A place to love and to grieve.

A place for the righteous and the meek.

A place for the conservative and the progressive.

A place for the disenfranchised and the privileged.

In this place, may we find our way to one another.

May we shine a light in the dark.

And may we courageously create a world in which all can be free.

So may it be.