

## DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

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Sermon, UUFVB May 24, 2020

Meditation prayer by - Rev. Ashley Horan, UUA Organizing Strategy Director

### **Another World is Possible:**

*We say it, again and again, even when the proof lies somewhere beyond the horizon, beyond our reach, beyond our imagination. This is our faith: Another world is possible. Not somewhere else-- another world, another lifetime-- but here, and now, for us and for all. Another world is possible. There is no single path toward that world; no one strategy or approach that will restore balance, heal brokenness, sow wholeness, free creation. There are many routes toward liberation, toward freedom. But the abundance of options does not absolve us of the responsibility of acting. Another world is possible. The call--the duty--of each moment in history is to discern: Another world is possible. Who are we, and what can we bring with humility, integrity, faith? What is the context, and how can we address it with agility, resilience, skill? What is the vision, and how can we realize it with accountability, relationship, joy? Another world is possible. In this time of despair, of fear, of collapse-- this time that is both like every other era and like no other time in history-- It is audacious to declare our faith and to commit our work to a world that is more free, more just, more whole. But we are an audacious people in good company, with many kin, and we are ready to show up and work hard and stay humble and make friends and hold the vision starting here, now, today, with us and persevering-- however long it takes-- until that other world is not only possible, but Another world is here.*

Unitarian Minister Rev. Schyler Vogel

Let us settle into this moment together, to sink into the wisdom that this work is sacred the work of justice is sacred the work of organizing and voting and protecting democracy is sacred.

We know that our country is broken. We know that our system is not fair. We know that our democracy serves the powerful and the wealthy, and not all of us. We know it is rigged. But it is not too late. We hold space in this room for those most impacted and harmed by this brokenness, we do not forget or ignore the human faces behind the oppression. The incarcerated, who have lost their voice in a unjust system, the undocumented, who are our neighbors and pay their fair share, the citizen whose voting station has been closed, whose name has been taken from the registration lists, who lacks an ID and is turned away from the poll. Let us bring into this space our ancestors. Those who throughout history were deprived of their democratic rights, because of their skin color, their ethnicity, their gender, the citizenship status, their poverty, their education. Bring into this space the radicals, the activists, organizers, the reformers, who fought for the vote, Bring into this space those who gave their lives for this freedom, the right to have our voice heard, the freedom that we defend today. May all of them be with us, here. May they remind us of the stakes, may they remind us of their courage, may they remind us that the path to justice is long and frustrating and full of setbacks, but that there is still hope, always hope, we have good and faithful company in this work, all those who came before, all those out there right now, all of us here. It is not yet too late. There is still hope, let us work together

55 years ago, young Roy Cooper boarded a greyhound bus in Seattle headed for Selma Alabama. Carrying only a backpack and my mother's guitar, Roy answered the call from Dr. Martin Luther King to join

thousands of college students, religious leaders and civil rights workers in a massive march to demand the right to vote for all. As John Legend pointed out in the video we watched earlier, the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1870 gave decedents of slaves the *right* to vote, the ability to exercise that right was prohibited. Using intimidation and arbitrarily administered literacy tests or poll taxes, black voters were frozen from participation in their own government. This historic march in 1965 demonstrated for the world to see that in the almost 100 years of having the right to vote, the practice was, in fact, denied.

I was 10 years old when we watched the March from Selma to Montgomery but no stranger to the picket line. My family regularly marched for racial justice, including the rights to vote, in our predominately white northern city of Seattle. Like many of you, we joined protest marches in our own cities to support those in Alabama and across the nation fighting end racially- discriminatory voting laws and practices. As Unitarian Universalists, we joined with others in the religious community, armed with our 5<sup>th</sup> Principle promoting the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregation and in society at large. Roy made it home after the march, but was arrested in Birmingham and that was the last we saw of my mother's guitar. Unitarian Universalists around the country, including minister Reverend James Reeb and Viola Luizzo, joined to call. Reverend Reeb and Ms. Luizzo did not share the same fate as Roy Cooper. Both lost their lives to the cause. Viola was murdered shuttling marchers from Montgomery back to Selma and young Reverend Reeb was savagely beaten and murdered by white segregationists. Martin Luther King delivered Rev. Reeb's eulogy saying Reeb "was an attorney for the defense of the innocent in the court of world opinion. He was a witness to the truth that men of different races and classes might live, eat, and work together as brothers." The three white men accused of killing Reeb were acquitted. It was following this bloody protest seen around the world that President Lyndon Johnson signed the landmark Voting's Rights Act into law banning any discriminatory voting laws or customs denying anyone the vote. The [U.S. Constitution](#) does not explicitly include a right to vote.

Our founding fathers decided to leave that up to the states. However, as the children's video Kelly showed, only white, male property owners were presumed that right and only through constitutional amendments over the life of this nation have voting rights extended beyond that group. It was French countryman Alexis de Tocqueville, while observing the debates and trials to form our new country, who described this work as the "great experiment" in American democracy. De Tocqueville saw the new world not as a land, but as a philosophy. The new world of democracy. An experiment of a self-governed nation where the people, not a king, would determine their own destiny. Owning a vote in this experimental democracy was a precious right. The wisdom of our founding documents keeps our Constitution a living, breathing document amenable to adjust for the times. Yet, changing this experimental nation to reflect the times often came with a battle and people of our faith never stood down from a fight for justice.

### [UU the Vote Thrive Video](#)

While the new Voting Rights Act outlawed literacy tests and poll taxes, new tactics to squelch the votes black and brown people emerged. New ways to suppress the vote before it ever reaches the ballot box. These suppression tactics are alive and well today. In writing this sermon, I wanted to illustrate different voter suppression tactics. The examples are overwhelming and amazing to what lengths those wanting to silence voters will do to keep I selected just a few examples of three types of tactics:

1. Disinformation
2. Changing the rules and purging
3. Blocking voter expansion legislation

Disinformation is a popular tactic for suppressing votes. In the 2008 elections, Democrats in Nevada received robo-calls informing them that they could vote on November 5 a day after the election to avoid long lines. Voters in Lake County, Ohio, received official-looking mail stating that voters who had registered to vote through Democratic-leaning organizations would be barred from the 2008 election. And Michigan's Secretary of State had to fight a phone-based disinformation campaign telling absentee voters to mail their ballots to the wrong address. Another campaign distributed mass flyer to communities of color saying that Republicans vote on Tuesday and Democrats vote on Wednesday. Another tactic is to change the rules. On October 9, 2018, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a North Dakota law requiring voters to have an ID with a current street address, thereby potentially preventing tens of thousands from voting—including an estimated 5,000 Native Americans. Native Americans on reservations use P.O. boxes and not street addresses for their mail. Recent voter ID laws are used by states by imposing a solution in search of a problem that doesn't exist – voter fraud. These new laws require government-issued identification in order to cast a ballot. The problem is that many poor people do not have government-issued ID. The American Civil Liberties Union estimates that 11% of US citizens, or more than 21 million Americans, do not have them. Each state using Voter ID requires different forms. Texas allows concealed weapons permits for voting but will not accept student ID cards. Until recently, North Carolina prohibited state employee ID Cards which are disproportionately held by black voters. A Cal Tech/MIT study found that minority voters are more frequently questioned about ID than white voters. The American Civil Liberties Union claims the real reason for the rash of new voter ID laws is to diminish to voting power in the African- and Hispanic-Americans, students, the elderly and the disabled communities. Research shows that adding extra requirements at the ballot box deters voters.

This past gubernatorial race in Georgia was particularly illustrative of voter suppression. 53,000 voter registrants—70 percent of whom were black—were placed in “pending” status by the secretary of state because of minor misspellings or missing hyphens on their registration forms. Since 2012, this Secretary of State purged an estimated 1.5 million people from the state voter rolls. These purges disproportionately affected African Americans; whose voter registrations were removed at a rate that was 1.25 times higher than for white Americans in the same counties. The Georgian Secretary of State behind these voter purgings? None other than Brian Kemp, the Republican running against Democrat Stacey Abrams for Governor. The film, *Suppressed: The Fight to Vote* exposes the atrocities this one race faced.

**SUPPRESSED CLIP 26:39 – 28:04**

Brian Kemp narrowly won the race by only 55,000 votes.

You can view the entire video at [www.bravenewfilms.org/suppressed](http://www.bravenewfilms.org/suppressed). Download it and share it with all your friends. Another suppression tactic is to block legislation designed enhance voting and democracy. The December 6<sup>th</sup> edition of Politico reports on the efforts of African American Terri Sewell, U.S. Representative whose Alabama district includes Selma, to introduce *The Voting Rights Advancement Act* protecting voter rights. The act targeted pre-clearing any state election laws changes which might restrict voting with the Department of Justice. Laws or regulations such as limited hours, consolidated voting operations or inadequate multilingual voting materials would require review. She presented this

legislation in the past three congresses. It failed in the first two sessions, but this session, it passed. "We protect the legacy of the foot soldiers of the voting rights movement" with the package, Sewell claimed. She singled out for praise John Lewis, one such "foot soldier," who stood by her side during the briefing. "So many of us walk the halls of Congress because of this legislation," she said, referring to the 1965 Voting Rights Act, before telling Lewis: "To say thank you ... doesn't seem adequate." In brief remarks at the event, Lewis called voting "the most powerful nonviolent tool we have in our Democratic society," but said this legislation came in the midst of an "ongoing struggle to redeem the soul of America, and we're not there yet." Today, this piece of legislation, like many others, remains buried on the desk of our U.S. Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell. It is doubtful that during McConnell's tenure, this bill will ever see the light of the Senate floor.

New York Times recently reported Republican McConnell opposing high voter turnout because he suspects people will vote Democrat. The paper reported McConnell openly mocked the idea of an Election Day holiday, as many countries do, calling it a "power grab" by Democrats. During the recent impeachment hearings of Donald Trump, McConnell and his cronies ridiculed the need for an impeachment hearing invoking voting as the remedy for removing an unpopular president. You can't have it both ways Mitch. You can't call for voting as a means of expression and at the same time, squelch the right to voting. Make no mistake. Voter suppression is as racist as slavery and lynching. It says, "you don't count. Your voice will not be heard. You will be silenced." As we head into our upcoming elections, we can only imagine the scandalous tactics being prepared to silence more and more voters.

Our elections are in trouble. Our democracy is in trouble. I have not even discussed accusations of foreign entities meddling with our elections and what impact it has on our democracy. I often wonder, though, will we ever reach a true American democracy in our country? Will this great experiment be doomed to failure? With our current economic issues, this deadly virus sweeping our world, and the dismantling of American democracy, this upcoming election is like no other. Unitarian Universalist nationwide are coordinating efforts to protect voting rights, to engage in massive voter registration and to follow the call to have this be the largest turnout of American voters in this country. As John Lewis urged, we need to battle for the soul of our country with the same fervor our foreparents did in the 1960's civil rights movement. This mobilization of our faith is called "UU the Vote."

This campaign is a nonpartisan, all-hands on deck movement. It is a deepening and expansion of social justice and voter mobilization efforts UUs have pursued in the past.

Here is a message from Susan Fredrick-

Gray, the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association launching the UU the Vote Campaign:

[Susan Fredrick-Gray video](#)

Three Components of a UU Voting Campaign: Connect with a community partner. Our congregation is working with the Indian River NAACP to join their registration efforts. At this time, the organization is refiguring how best to reach non-voters, folks who have not voted in the past two elections, and new voters – young people. When the campaign is launched, it will include phone and text banking, and mailings. We can all help in some form and I will keep our congregation informed once the wheels are in place.

1. Advocate for our UU values, support ballot initiatives for justice, as we organize for civic engagement. We are advocating vote by mail.
2. Get Out the Vote massively! From early and absentee voting to election day on November 3, 2020.

How can we be ready in November to work at polls to ensure fair voting?

In our old normal, we would join other progressives, hit the streets and engage person-to-person voter registration drives. However, our new normal has us retooling this campaign. This virus has put a halt to planned efforts to have UU's on the streets registering folks to vote. Efforts are reconsidering ways we can create a massive voter registration from now on and massive voter turnout in November. This year's Unitarian Universalist General Assembly has moved to a virtual gathering, allowing us to safely congregate and continue the work of our faith. Join thousands of UU's next month, June 25 to 28. And, we will have a special UU the Vote orientation for congregation organizing on Wednesday, June 24. Please join us! Whether you are passionate about immigration, racial justice, LGBTQ equity, or climate, ALL our justice issues are at stake in 2020. This is the time to step up. This is the time to honor our foot soldiers of the past and to pave the way for our future leaders. This is the time to show those not yet old enough to vote but who are watching our every move to see what we did to save our democracy. This is the time to join in a movement like no other to ensure massive numbers of voters participate in the democratic process and take back our democracy. This is the time to fully embrace and honor our faith and ensure *this* land, this promise, this incredible experiment in American democracy, remains *our* land.

Amen

Benediction

I offer these words from a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Unitarian, Edward Everett Hale

I am only one, But still, I am one I cannot do everything, But still, I can do something; And, because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something I can do.