

So That Democracy May Survive
Sunday, May 28, 2023
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snaveley

I began my ministry back in 1984 as a United Methodist minister serving a two-point charge of a church in Beaver Meadows, Pennsylvania and a church in Weatherly, Pennsylvania. My parents drove up into the coal country of eastern Pennsylvania with me as I began. It took us a little while to find Beaver Meadows. We drove straight through it several times before we realized we had driven out of Hazelton and into Beaver Meadows. There are about 1000 people and about 4 miles of public roads in Beaver Meadows. I am telling you this because every year I served that charge I spent Memorial Day morning in Beaver Meadows.

The morning began with a parade down the main road. There was a high school band, the VFW, the American Legion, a car with the four clergy of the town, a car with the poppy queen, a car with the poppy king, cars with the town officials, a car with the students who would take part in the ceremony to follow the parade, and the scouts. When we arrived at the town green the band would play the National Anthem, the mayor would give a welcome, a rotating clergy person would lead a prayer, a student would read or recite "The Gettysburg Address", another student would read or recite "In Flanders Fields", someone would give a speech, a wreath would be laid on a memorial to the town's war dead, the Girl Scouts would sing "Let There Be Peace on Earth," there would be a ceremonial firing of rifles, and finally the playing of "Taps." I expect if I showed up in Beaver Meadows, Pennsylvania tomorrow thirty-some years later the Memorial Day gathering would still be much the same. In fact, I expect if I showed up in many towns tomorrow the ceremony would not look that much different in any of them.

According to History.com, "The Civil War, which ended in the spring of 1865, claimed more lives than any conflict in U.S. history and required the establishment of the country's first national cemeteries.

"By the late 1860s, Americans in various towns and cities had begun holding springtime tributes to these countless fallen soldiers, decorating their graves with flowers and reciting prayers.

"It is unclear where exactly this tradition originated; numerous different communities may have independently initiated the memorial gatherings. And some records show that one of the earliest Memorial Day commemorations was organized by a group of formerly enslaved people in Charleston, South Carolina less than a month after the Confederacy surrendered in 1865," [Memorial Day 2023: Facts, Meaning & Traditions | HISTORY](#).

What are we doing in these ceremonies? For some, mourning the dead. Too many people still have family members and friends who died in war, but many others of us don't know anyone who died in war or know them only obliquely- a father's cousin, a friend's nephew. We show up to honor those dead, but that is not the only reason we are there. As Lincoln said, "It is ... for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us-that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion-that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain-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."

Taking part in the Memorial Day ceremony is to be part of a civic gathering of people not just honoring the dead but making a commitment to the ideal of this country as a nation with a government of the people, by the people and for the people; a democracy.

That tradition is threatened today as some of our own politicians and political thinkers follow Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in his perversion of the term “democracy”. In August of 2021 Amanda Coakley wrote for Foreign Policy’s Dispatch, “Christian democrats, spearheaded by parties like Germany’s Christian Democratic Union, were the drivers of European integration following World War II. The movement’s cornerstones were a wariness of nationalism, a firm belief in democracy, and an embrace of pluralism. In contrast, Orbán’s Hungarian brew, while seeking to appropriate the mantle of Christian democracy, is being used as a shield against growing criticism from Brussels, a vehicle to introduce discriminatory laws against minorities, and a convenient narrative to supercharge Fidesz’s (Orbán’s party’s) nationalism.

“These people are not Christian democrats in the historical sense of the term,” said Olivier Roy, a French political scientist. “In Hungary, what you have is a populist party who claims to be Christian. It’s purely about Christian identity.”...

“The biggest difference between Hungary’s new approach and traditional European center-right politics is the belief in democracy itself. Since retaking power in 2010, Orbán has pushed through constitutional and legal changes to undermine the country’s democratic institutions. The courts have been stacked with Fidesz loyalists, free speech was curtailed, and the autonomy of the nation’s universities was put in jeopardy. The dismantling led think tank Freedom House to downgrade the country from ‘free’ to ‘partly free’ in 2019. None of this bothered Orbán, who declared in 2014 ‘the new state that we are building is an illiberal state.’” [Hungary's Orbán Is on a Mission to Remake the Right \(foreignpolicy.com\)](https://foreignpolicy.com).

In August of last year Viktor Orbán was the keynote speaker at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Dallas, Texas. An article in [The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com) reported that, “Peter Montgomery, a senior fellow at the non-profit group Right Wing Watch, said: ‘Rightwing leaders, and especially the religious right leaders in the US, love Viktor Orbán for the same reasons they love Vladimir Putin. This overt embrace of Christian nationalism, willingness to use strongman tactics and the power of the government to enforce so-called traditional values about family and sexuality.’

“Montgomery added: ‘We’ve actually seen some signs of that illiberalism and authoritarianism on the ... right in their efforts to ban the teaching of racism in schools, in their aggressive attacks against LGBTQ materials and information in schools and libraries, and even their encouragement of harassment and violence that we’ve seen against election officials and school board members.

“All those signs are signs of a disturbing embrace of authoritarianism on the US right and Orbán is a model and a hero for that to them,” [Viktor Orbán turns Texas conference into transatlantic far-right love-in | CPAC | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com).

This week Michelle Boorstein published an article in [The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com) titled, “Texas pushes church into state with bills on school chaplains, Ten Commandments.” In it was the story of one family leaving Texas. “After 23 years in Texas, Sravan Krishna plans to move his family out of the state before his two young children start school in the fall. A practicing Hindu who attended Christian schools as a boy,

Krishna said the departure will bring a 'lot of pain' in the short term. But an accumulation of things — from growing opposition to diversity and anti-racism education, as well as book bans and what he calls 'Christian nationalism' — forced his hand, he said.

“In the beginning, I thought: ‘How can a place like this, one of the wealthiest Zip codes in the state, be so backward?’ Krishna said. “I thought: ‘Oh, they’re just misinformed,’ but from there it never changed. There isn’t much of an uproar, and it’s even welcomed, this forcing of a particular religious view.” [Texas bills on school chaplains, 10 Commandments merge church and state - The Washington Post](#).

Many of us know people leaving Florida. Heather Cox Richardson in her blog this week noted that, “The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), a Latino civil rights organization; Equality Florida, a gay rights advocacy group; and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) have all issued advisories warning against travel to Florida. “Florida is openly hostile toward African Americans, people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals,” the NAACP said. ‘Before traveling to Florida, please understand that the state of Florida devalues and marginalizes the contributions of, and the challenges faced by African Americans and other communities of color.’”

So, on that depressing note, what do we who are staying or staying at least for a while longer do so that democracy may survive? How do we defend the ideal of a government of the people, by the people and for the people? The person we elected as our Unitarian Universalist Association President the Rev. Dr. Susan Frederick-Gray said last November, “We hold the practice of democracy within our denomination and society as sacred. Unitarian Universalists believe that every voice matters and every voice is needed. Unfettered access to the ballot is essential to ensuring every voice is heard. To help realize that vision for American society, over the last several years, we have partnered directly with the communities most subject to voter suppression tactics, especially Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) that experience both systemic policies and threats of violent intimidation to prevent them from exercising their Constitutional rights.

“In both words and deeds, through our nonpartisan civic engagement initiative - UU the Vote - and other actions, UUs have shown how much we revere defending and expanding democracy and protecting the right to vote. In fact, on election day, when voters in Philadelphia were surprised to find the polling location where they had voted for decades suddenly closed, UUs quickly moved into action to provide information and rides for voters to their new polling location. I am proud of the ways that UUs showed up in Pennsylvania and across the country to make clear, measurable differences in the nation’s democratic processes.

“I am also gratified that so many Americans - including those from historically marginalized communities - showed their commitment to democracy and came out to vote yesterday and in the days and weeks beforehand. And as a leader of a religious denomination that has embraced support for Reproductive Justice and has long supported keeping abortion legal in all or most cases, I am heartened to see that many voters chose to protect reproductive rights.

“Whatever the final outcome of this election cycle is, Unitarian Universalists will continue our work to protect democracy. And we remain committed to supporting those communities – including BIPOC communities, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, disabled people, women, and people living in poverty - who face disproportionate impact from growing anti-democratic, authoritarian threats in this country,” [Unitarian Universalists Remain Committed to Democracy | Press Releases | UUA.org](#).

When you think about what you can do to help democracy to survive here in the United States of America do not think that you are expected to do it all on your own. You are a part of a religious community committed to “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

It takes all of us volunteering, voting, serving, protesting, petitioning, being engaged in our civic duties. “we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—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.” Or, as Rev. Lucas Hergert says,

“we are democracy—unruly, unfinished, unrelenting
people of rebellious joy taking to the streets
underground resilience resisting complaisance
the pleasure of activism organizing into simple hope

“we are democracy,
people of principles taking on principalities
witnessing the worth of those called unworthy
justice just now gaining ground
integrity of interdependent existence extending
living democracy in heads hands hearts

“we know that democracy can die, ossify
brittle byproducts of bygone idealists
plotting politicians pirating votes
corporations cannibalizing our care for the world
look: it can wither, distend, come to an end

“democracy, today we will love you alive
make you ours, make you thrive...”

On this Memorial Day weekend may we embrace this our civic duty to make democracy thrive.

