

Birthing a Nation
Sunday, July 7, 2024
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

July 4 marks the American colonies' declaration of their independence from Britain. But declaring and fighting for independence was but one step in becoming a nation. There was much hard work to do to turn separate colonies into one united country. You could say that the fourth of July was but the date of conception and that the country has had multiple births and rebirths since then. In reference to our country, I believe in being born again, and again and again.

Many over the years of this country's existence have given her words of reproach, words of healing, words of encouragement. Frederick Douglass nine years before the Civil War in 1852 in his speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" said, "The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie." Words of reproach. After World War I, as he was campaigning for the Presidency, Warren Harding said, "America's present need is not heroics but healing; not nostrums but normalcy; not revolution but restoration." Words of Healing. And from twentieth century First Lady and activist Eleanor Roosevelt, "True patriotism springs from a belief in the dignity of the individual, freedom and equality not only for Americans but for all people on earth, universal (kinship) and good will, and a constant and earnest striving toward the principles and ideals on which this country was founded." Words of encouragement.

These words are one element of the midwifery needed to birth and rebirth our nation. Sometimes it is not our words that are needed but our push back against others' words. Maybe some of you heard the piece by Jude Joffe-Block this week on bilingual community volunteers helping to fight misinformation in immigrant communities. The pilot project was designed by researchers at the Information Futures Lab at Brown University's School of Public Health.

The NPR piece began with an incident encountered by one of the volunteers. "Late last year, Scarlett Lanzas was chatting with neighbors — a group of fellow immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean — at the community pool in their housing development in Miami. That's when Lanzas heard a neighbor say something in Spanish that was not true.

"The woman asked the group if they had heard that the presidential election was not going to happen in 2024.

"And I was like, 'What?' Lanzas remembered. 'Where did you get that from?' ...

"The research team figured out that the rumor had originated with a video on social media in which an Alexa device seems to say the 2024 election will not take place.

"It was popularized by Alex Jones, who has a history of spreading conspiracy theories.

“‘It was translated into Spanish, and it took on a life of its own,’ said Stefanie Friedhoff, professor of practice and co-director of the Information Futures Lab. ‘Spanish-speaking communities were already being targeted with campaigns to try to prevent them from voting, basically.’

“Two other navigators also alerted the team to the same rumor. Just this month, it resurfaced in Spanish again.

“The research team created shareable text messages and videos to alert people that the election is indeed happening Nov. 5 and to watch out for rumors circulating to try to confuse people.

“We know that people trust information more when it comes from sources or from cultural contexts that they already know.

“Lanzas forwarded the information on to her neighbor over WhatsApp — which Friedhoff says is exactly how the project was designed to work.

“‘We know that people trust information more when it comes from sources or from cultural contexts that they already know,’ Friedhoff said, [Florida pilot project uses community voices to combat rumors : NPR](#).

Do you know the poem by twentieth century American poet and activist Langston Hughes “Let America Be America Again?”

It begins,

“Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

“(America never was America to me.)

“Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

“(It never was America to me.)

“O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

“(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.”)

*“Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?”*

“I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak....”

That is the beginning of the poem. But the poem ends like this.

“O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

“Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states
And make America again!” [Let America Be America Again by Langston Hughes | Poetry Foundation](#)

It can be easy to become discouraged. There is indeed much that is wrong in our country. But giving up and doing nothing is not the answer. It takes each of us doing something to make America again.

We work against misinformation in our communities. We volunteer at voter registration drives. We speak at town meetings. We show up for school board meetings. We are poll workers. We write and publish poems and stories to share our truths. We organize rallies. We join organizations with others who share the values we want for our nation.

The eighteenth century French philosopher Montesquieu said, “The tyranny of a prince in an oligarchy is not so dangerous to the public welfare as the apathy of a citizen in a democracy.” Or as President Teddy Roosevelt put it, “The first requisite of a good citizen in this republic of ours is that (one) shall be able and willing to pull (one’s) own weight.”

On this fourth of July weekend, I am asking us to consider not the privileges of being an American but the responsibilities of being one. We make our country what it is. To return to

Langston Hughes again, he said, "I am a citizen. I tread the path of honor. It is my right, my privilege, my duty."

Finally, a good example of citizenship from our Unitarian Universalist past, a British immigrant to our shores, Rev. A. Powell Davies.

"In 1944 as victory neared in World War II, Davies was called to the capital of America. He became minister to All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. He had a passion for being current in his preaching.... When atomic bombs exploded in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he immediately saw the implications. He chaired conferences calling for civilian control of this new power. His testimony before Congressional Committees was an important moral force in the establishment of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. In November 1946 he had already prepared his sermon when he saw a photograph in the Washington Post. After his sermon he held up the photo of a party at which two U.S. Navy Admirals are cutting a cake shaped like an atomic mushroom cloud. A cake made of tiny angel food puffs. To Davies, the cake was obscene. He said, 'How would it seem in Hiroshima, or Nagasaki, to know that Americans make cakes of angel food puffs in the image of that terrible, diabolical thing that brought sudden death to thousands of their friends, and a lingering, loathsome death to thousands of others? It is the most corrupt and rotten thing I have seen in eighteen years of living in this land I love and which to me is the only hope for the human future on this globe.'

"Pictures of the cake, with the text of Davies' wrathful judgment, appeared in newspapers in every continent but Antarctica. Reporters started regularly covering his sermons. As millions of Europeans were short of clothing, he read that American fashion designers were calling for ankle length skirts. He said women should be free of the dictates of fashion. He called the long skirts 'immoral,' because they wasted material needed by the suffering world at that time. His pulpit call for 'short skirts' made news around the world. He pressed for the U.S. to respond to starvation in Europe. All Souls Church gathered and shipped two tons of food, inspiring the government to ship a million tons more.

"In 1948 Davies dedicated a new hospital in Poland made possible by gifts from the Unitarian Service Committee. He was trying to see Jan Masaryk in Czechoslovakia as the Communists took over. Davies returned to America warning of the dangers of Communism. But soon members of his congregation were facing a different danger: the House Un-American Activities Committee and the attacks of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Davies examined the question: 'What is Un-American?' He noted it refers not only to a nation, but also to an ideology. In Davies' view the Un-American Activities Committee was itself Un-American. McCarthy blacklisted movie writers and drove out government workers. Sunday after Sunday, Davies gave moral courage to his congregation of Supreme Court justices, Congressmen, government workers and their families. In a nationally televised debate Davies challenged a McCarthy staff member to name one leading Protestant clergyman who was an espionage agent. He received no answer. Fear of McCarthy caused the State Department to ban the books of Davies from American overseas libraries. Finally, President Eisenhower turned against McCarthy, and the high tide of the American Witchhunt receded.

“When Davies started his ministry in Washington, it was a segregated city: no racial mixing in clubs or coffee shops. Davies asked volunteers in the church to check the restaurants in the District and list those that would serve all races. Then he called on his congregation to move beyond “The Shelter of Good Intentions.” He asked them to say, “I will not eat a meal in any restaurant that excludes (Blacks).” He asked them to make this known to the management of such places. That Sunday, most of the congregation of over one thousand joined him in making that pledge. The small list of restaurants soon became one hundred and two hundred. And soon segregation in the District of Columbia would be unlawful.

“Davies also faced a segregated institution in his own church. During the week the Police Boys Club used the church gym. In 1949 the church board requested the club to take steps toward integration. In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools, and the church insisted that the Boys Club be integrated. In December the Police Boys Club moved out of the church. With the help of the Unitarian Service Committee the church organized an integrated Boys Club. Within a few years girls were included,” [“America’s Real Religion:” The Theology and Social Action of A. Powell Davies | Harvard Square Library.](#)

May we and our congregations seek to also be such an example.