

“Our Voice, Our Vote”

September 23, 2018

The Rev. Heather Janules

Perhaps you have seen him - the tall, lanky white man with a baseball cap, standing at the intersection of Commerce Way and Route 95 in Woburn, the center of a busy retail corridor. He holds a sign, printed on one side with the slogan "Support our Troops" and, on the other side, "Trump Won Fair and Square." He waves his sign enthusiastically, perhaps seeking acknowledgement or support. The times I have seen him, he has gotten responses, motorists honking and waving in assumed agreement. I don't know if the agreement is with one side of the sign or the other, or both. Each honk inspires a new wave of energy in this man, practicing his right to free speech.

I admire this man. I admire him because, like the rest of us, there are many things he can do with his time and he chooses to stand in traffic and proclaim his message. I admire him because I know it takes courage to draw attention to yourself, especially as a lone voice.

But while I find there is much to admire in this local activist, I have to disagree. I do not disagree with supporting those who serve in our military. No matter who is commander-in-chief, no matter one's politics, the voluntary pledge to a cause greater than one's own warrants our respect.

But...the other side of the sign, I do not agree that Donald Trump won the presidential election "fair and square." I disagree because there is credible evidence that's a foreign nation, Russia, manipulated our election process in Trump's favor.

So this man at the busy intersection serves as a symbol of all that I cherish about our nation's practice of democracy; we honor the sanctity of each citizen's voice in society. And this man also represents the many ways this civic sacrament is eroding. Beyond interference by other governments, there are voter registration laws that actively prohibit people-of-color going to the polls. There are districts, gerrymandered to look like lace doilies, ensuring that those people and those parties currently in power will stay in power. For those of us who believe in "the

right of conscience and the use of the democratic process," these are challenging times.

Standing before a Unitarian congregation, I imagine I am not alone in placing my faith in the practice of democracy. And by "placing my faith" I mean this in a literal sense as belief in "the right of conscience and use of the democratic process" is one of seven principles defining Unitarian Universalism. This principle also affirms that Unitarian Universalists use the democratic process within our congregations along with affirming, defending and upholding the practice of democracy in the wider world. Thus, what is a spiritual value has a civic dimension, reminding us that how we engage in society finds its roots in how we live into our covenants with one another here.

I know I am not alone when I affirm that these are challenging times. As we watch our elected officials hammer out what kind of nation we will be through policy and law, those of us who revere the sanctity of the earth, for those of us who hold convictions about universal human rights, for those of us who believe deeply in the democratic process, you know these are challenging times.

Yet, I observe that the language of the Fifth Principle speaks of "the democratic process" assuming there is only one. There are probably as many models of democratic engagement as there are names for the holy. When I begin to feel hopeless, I remind myself there is always another, another way that still honors each voice and each vote.

And when I feel hopeless, I return to a hidden truth; the democratic process would not be violated and manipulated if it were not effective. Our democracy is a target not because of its flaws but because of its power.

I confess that as someone who believes in the democratic process, I have a poor track record in using my hard earned right to vote. Too many primary and special elections I have gone by without my participation or even paying attention to the races.

But, paradoxically, because the system seems so vulnerable and fractured these days, I have become more engaged. The current expression of our democracy may be deeply flawed and vulnerable to attack but it is the system we have. If

there is any hope that the philosophical and spiritual integrity of democracy among us can be saved, it will be saved through the conversion of passive citizens into active advocates and voters. It will be saved by all of us using the voice we have been given to articulate our vision of how our towns, our commonwealth, our nation should be.

This Sunday, I have welcomed Sarah Kelley and Taj Smith into the chancel as they are working to draw attention to the opportunity for Massachusetts voters to make their voice heard on three ballot questions. You may find text of these questions in the insert in your order-of-service.

These questions need your civic voice. These questions – and a number of candidates seeking elected office - need your vote this November.

Lending your voice begins with listening, not only to the proponents of different positions and the advocates for different candidates but to the voice within, the voice of conscience. May we hear this voice and may we use this voice in the public square. You may or may not want to stand in the median of a busy intersection to proclaim your deeply-held convictions. But there is another way.