

Toxic Soup, American Style:  
Cultivating Serenity without Surrendering Your Values

Sunday, August 4, 2024  
Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #201 Glory, Glory, Hallelujah; #1031 May I Be Filled with Loving Kindness; #121 We'll Build a Land.

Personal Reflection by Courtney, Worship Associate

When I look at the state of the world, in this current moment, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Pain, outrage, and uncertainty seem present in every news story, on every social media page. Adding to the discomfort of all of that, I feel exhausted by the lack of empathy and general inability to hold space for different perspectives.

I've also noticed that the stress and polarization occurring on a national level can trickle down into my personal relationships, adding an extra layer of tension or anxiety to some interactions.

I was talking with my husband recently about an awkward discussion I had with a family member. This family member had wanted to give us some books that were intended to indoctrinate kids to a specific political ideology. I knew that this family member had meant well, but I had to set a boundary with them around what I was and was not comfortable with. When we had that conversation, I felt terrible – I worried they would feel hurt and rejected. This worry didn't stop me from having the conversation... but still – when debriefing with my husband later, I felt consumed with exhaustion, sadness, and self-doubt.

During our conversation, Michael said all the things a good partner should. He validated my feelings, agreed that the conversation had been tough but necessary. And then he said something that really struck me. He said, "We need to give grace – but not excuses."

Those simple words summed up the conflict I was feeling. I knew my family member was coming from a place of love and I empathized strongly with that. I was giving them grace. But I was fighting a strong urge to apologize, or make excuses for myself when setting a boundary. I was struggling to simply communicate my feelings, let the chips fall where they may, and allow my family member to have their own reaction.

"Give grace – but not excuses" - I'm not exaggerating when I say I think about that phrase every day. It helps me navigate work situations, family dynamics, parenting – any situation, really, where I'm encountering a perspective that is different, or perhaps in conflict, with mine. What's interesting is, sometimes I switch the wording up in my head. Sometimes, I find myself thinking: "Don't give excuses – but *do* give grace." And the switch in emphasis is important. It helps me remember to ground myself in my values, while also tapping into empathy – I may not agree with what someone is saying. But do I understand where they're coming from? Do I need to assert a boundary, or is it enough simply extend grace?

The dysfunction of today's world can be disheartening and challenging. As I make my way through, I'm trying to meet each interaction with an open heart. I'm trying to hold grace for myself and for others, without compromising my own values or integrity. I'm acting upon the premise that everyone I meet, in any interaction, is trying their best. And so am I.

## Sermon by Roger Jones

In case you didn't see the description for the sermon on the website or in the all-church email, it says this: "So many of us are stewing in the deadly soup of polarized politics, disinformation campaigns, widespread suffering, and a lack of civility and respect. It's indeed a scary time in U.S. history, and it hurts our spirits. Is it possible to confront untruth and violence, as well as to recognize the shared humanity of those who threaten our visions for a just and free society?"

I hope it is possible. Doing so, however, will take most of us beyond the edge of our comfort zones. It will be hard work.

You may think that I assume everyone here is from the same political party, but I know that is not the case. Or you may be surprised to hear we have a range of political perspectives in UU congregations, but we do. However, I think the range has narrowed in recent years. That is, many of our deceased Republican Unitarians<sup>1</sup> are probably turning in their graves since their party has turned to Christian fundamentalist nationalism and a cult-like devotion to Donald Trump. It has tried to take away the freedom to make choices about your own body and your own relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Given our political diversity as Unitarian Universalists over the two centuries of our movement's history, you might ask, what has held us together, kept us in community? I think it is our liberal religious values. Our values have held us together and called us forward. One value is the dignity and inherent worth of every person. Another value is interdependence. People are connected and we need one another; we depend on one another. We need connections which are authentic and respectful. Another value is democracy—the principle of it, and its practice in our congregations and the larger society. This value is in danger, and it needs our help.

In many countries where democratic norms have been widely accepted and practiced for decades, autocratic movements are seizing power. In this country as well, personal freedom and human decency are under attack. A radical right-wing movement has made its choice for president, and they have a chance of winning in November. They've been clear about their agenda if they do.

Fretting about these dangers has caused me to wake up in the middle of the night and have trouble getting back to sleep. I've decided that I shouldn't read articles about politics after dinner. I don't watch cable TV news, but I hear enough even on public radio to get me stirred up. Notifications on my phone also agitate me. I try to minimize how much social media I receive, but I'm aware that YouTube, Facebook, TikTok and Twitter/X captivate a lot of people. My impression, and my worry, is that all of it is fueling rage, polarization and mistrust in our fellow human beings. I fear it leads to helplessness and isolation.

Something else I fear, especially for myself, is the phenomenon of watching versus doing. A few years ago, I read that if progressive-minded Americans were to spend as much time working on election campaigns as we do in reading about polls and surveys or watching commentators tell us their opinions about political strategies, we could change election outcomes. Individual involvement can be pivotal in city, county, school district, and statewide campaigns. Even for national campaigns, volunteers can motivate people to vote who otherwise might neglect to turn in a ballot. Moreover, doing something productive gives us a sense of purpose and hope. It connects us to our communities.

Democracy relies on human-to-human connections. Democracy depends on respect, personal commitment, courage, and a sense of shared humanity.

Autocracy, on the other hand, depends on fear and violence. For example, on January 6, 2021, President Trump incited a mob of supporters to break into the U.S. Capitol so he could stay in power. As they ransacked the place, they wanted to apprehend elected officials or even kill them, including Vice President Pence. A wooden gallows with a noose was erected on the Capitol grounds. Yet even after they all had to hide from this violence, only seven Republican senators voted to convict the President in

his second impeachment trial; 43 of them voted not guilty. It seems to me that in a healthy democracy, presidents fear losing the support of the members of their party. In an autocracy, however, party members fear the person at the top.

I'd like to describe a few more features of autocratic and fascist movements. For example, while it's not uncommon for a politician to be caught lying, or at least exaggerating, autocrats tell outlandish lies. They keep repeating them. Some people will believe their lies, because they want to. Other citizens will become demoralized at the spread of those lies and give up. Autocrats accuse their opponents of doing the very things they are attempting to do. They cry that they are persecuted while they plan, carry out, and lead the persecution of other people.

While autocratic leaders take pleasure in being cruel, they don't seem to have a sense of humor. Of course, laughing at politicians and other public figures is a big feature of a free society, but autocrats can't laugh at themselves. They don't like to be made fun of or satirized. Fortunately, we have no shortage of material to keep us laughing as we work to stop them.

Plans for a new Trump administration are not funny, however. They are outlined in Project 2025, a document funded and created by dozens of right-wing foundations.<sup>3</sup> It shows replacing civil servants with Trump loyalists and using the U.S. Justice Department to go after so-called enemies of Trump. Yet, following the autocrat's playbook, it is Trump who says that judicial systems around the country have been "weaponized" against him.<sup>4</sup>

Usually, fascist movements pursue their goals gradually. They begin by attacking the rights and the safety of the most vulnerable or misunderstood people in a society. Then, as the public gets used to the first assaults, those in power target other groups. More people get labeled as dangerous and inferior. As an example, some states have passed laws against the rights of transgender students and adults. Another example is when undocumented immigrants and asylum-seekers are labelled by politicians as "the worst of the worst," even though many are families escaping persecution, poverty and crime.

These are things that wake me up in the middle of the night. I know they worry many of you. These are things that our shared values call us to confront. It's hard. It's uncomfortable.

Sometimes it helps me to remember the Serenity Prayer. In its current form, it says, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Doing this is not an escape for me; nor is it surrender. For me it's like taking a breath, clearing my head. I want to be clear enough to see what's going on and see what I can do.

Autocratic leaders try to suppress the news media, and ideally to take it over. Manufacturing and controlling the news helps them create the narrative which everyone is expected to know, follow, and spread. When propaganda is doing its magic on people, they have a view on reality that can be as unmovable by someone like me as it is unbelievable to me.

Next month I'll make a trip to my native state to see people in my hometown and in the city where I attended college. Not every part of a visit home is easy, especially with relatives who keep their favorite cable TV news channel going in the background. As I try to visit with them, I'm distracted by the outrageously blunt assertions by the news personalities, even if nobody in the room mentions it at all. If by chance someone brings up a political topic or asks me a question directly, I try to answer. I try to be true to our UU values.

But if a person just blurts out an obnoxious opinion, I resist the temptation to argue. "Grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change," I tell myself. It's worth a chance. On my next visit home, I may ask a relative if we could turn the volume off so I can hear them better. Or maybe I'll ask if we can do our catching up during a walk or at a dinner out.

Of course, I don't have to go back to the Midwest to hear scary political opinions. One morning last month I was hanging out at one of the places I have coffee, reading my phone. At a table nearby were two regulars who happened to be chatting: a white man about 70 years old and a white woman in her late 80s. Though I agree with *his* politics, I like *her* better. I've seen her watching Fox News Channel on her phone. *How could she?* I wonder. That is, she attends a liberal Christian congregation. We have found common ground in talking about helping people who are unhoused. How can she buy that propaganda? The other man told her: "I have a question for you, just in the spirit of dialogue. We both receive Social Security benefits, right?" he asked her. Yes, she said, noting that hers was pretty good. "Aren't you afraid they'll take that away if Republicans get elected?"

She replied, "We need Trump. Biden is ruining the country. Immigration is terrible." The man brought up Trump's morals. She said, "I don't care about Trump's fooling around. Other presidents have been unfaithful too. With each assertion I overheard, heat rose up in my chest and throbbed at my temples. "Yes, but..." I wanted to interject; "aren't you missing a few things?" But I pretended that I wasn't listening, just as I did with the TV blaring in my relative's living room. I thought to myself, "She's not any more interested in hearing my perspective than I am in exploring hers. Don't bother."

Then she said that President Obama was "communistically inclined." *Ha!* I laughed out loud. I couldn't help myself. Hearing me, the man asked me to comment. I said I needed to get to work, but really, I just needed to get away. I felt like screaming, which would have gotten me thrown out.

As I walked out to the parking lot, I saw the car that I knew was hers. The heat again rose up in my chest and I felt it in my head. "I wonder how I could vandalize her car," I asked myself. Then I thought, "Could I get away with it? Maybe I'll save it for another day." In that moment, I felt really serious; I was that upset. I hadn't merely tasted the toxic soup; I had fallen into the pot.

God, grant me the serenity to accept what I can't change, especially when I can't change another person's reality by arguing with them, much less by yelling at them.

Spiritually speaking, one of the hardest things about these painful times is that no matter how angry or upset we get with people, we are called to remember our common humanity. Even if we fantasize about telling them off—or worse—it's up to us to remember the humanity of those whose opinions worry and scare us. While doing this is hard, but it can empower us to remind our opponents of the humanity of those they seek to demonize.

The great African American writer James Baldwin said it this way: "One cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own." He did not make any exceptions. In spite of the violence and hatred which he wanted all Americans to recognize and confront, Baldwin called us to our common humanity.

But this does not mean giving up. It actually means continuing to *speak up* about what we value. You and I need to be clear in speaking about this. We don't have to convince others, but we need to be able to say, "These are my values, and this is what I care about." We can start by practicing with one another. With one another, we can explain why we see things as we do can be done with personal story of ours or about someone we know and care about.

We don't need to convince, only to speak faithfully to our values. However, we do not need to do this if somebody doesn't want to listen.

Fortunately, there are many Americans who are open to a conversation, especially if they feel respected. This is where we can rise above the toxic soup of antagonism. Many people need to hear that their participation can make a difference—that their vote can make a difference. As we know from our nationwide project called [UU the Vote](#), sending personal mail is the second most effective means of motivating someone to vote when they might otherwise neglect to do so.

The #1 effective means of encouraging others to vote is by personal conversation. This can be one to one with a neighbor, or by door-to-door canvassing, or it can be organized through phone banks. Volunteers like us can be trained to call voters in other states. I know some volunteers who are taking road trips to canvass door to door in several states, including Nevada.

Even though there is volunteer training and support, this can be daunting. It always is for me, until the moment I knock on the door, or when someone answers the phone. Right then I'm too engaged in repeating my opening words to worry. And after a shift of calling people, I feel much better. It also feels good to write a stack of postcards to people we'll never meet and encourage them to register and then vote. Reaching out like this is a way to recognize our shared humanity with other people. It is a way to respect their power and urge them to use it.

This may seem intimidating, or you may just feel too stretched for this kind of work. If so, remember that monetary support is always necessary and helpful. Donations to voter mobilization projects like UU the Vote will pay for technology, staff, and training materials. Donations to your chosen candidates help them to travel, organize rallies, buy food for staff and volunteers, and pay for advertising.

In whatever way that we choose to show up for democracy, it can make a difference. The number of people who take the time to vote in this election can determine the makeup of the U.S House and Senate. It will determine who sits in the White House.

Bill McKibben is a writer and an activist against climate change. He's progressive Christian whose faith commitments look nothing like the conventions of Christian nationalists who provide a cult following for Donald Trump. McKibben's a founder of organizations like 350 dot org and Third Act. When asked what an individual can do to protect people, democracy, and the planet, he says: "The most important thing an individual can do, is be a little less of an individual. Join together with others in movements large enough to make change."<sup>5</sup>

Doing the work of protecting democratic norms and promoting our values can bring us out of helplessness or passivity into a sense of purpose, bring us out of isolation into community. *We the people* can do what seems overwhelming to *me*, the individual.

Earlier I told you that saying the Serenity Prayer helps me when I am feeling upset and overwhelmed by the plight of my county. It's worth noting that the original version of this prayer is worded in a different way: with *us* instead of *me*.

It was not written as a personal prayer but as a community one. Reinhold Niebuhr, a Protestant seminary professor and progressive activist, wrote it 90 years ago for a summer service in a church on a lake in Western Massachusetts.

Niebuhr was worried sick about the Nazi takeover of Germany's government in 1933, just a year earlier. He was calling on God's help not for himself but for all who shared his concerns and hopes and values. It goes like this: "Give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."<sup>6</sup>

The difference between the words *me* and *us* is the point on which democracy depends. So may we live—together—and so may it be. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples: U.S. Senator and Supreme Court Justice [Harold Hitz Burton](#) (1888-1964), U.S. Attorney General and ambassador Eliot Richardson (1920-1999), and Phyllis Hyatt Gardiner (1902-1983), who founded the Sacramento office of Planned Parenthood at our church with the support of the UUSS minister in the 1970s.

<sup>2</sup> I would argue that Republicans in control of the party and many of their voters cannot be called conservatives any longer; that's because they have rejected this country's traditions rather than conserving them. They violate the rule of law and constitutional discipline.

<sup>3</sup> Project 2025, Wikipedia, accessed Aug. 4, 2024. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project\\_2025](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_2025)

<sup>4</sup> Story in the Public Square, Season 15 Episode 15, April 21, 2024. <https://www.pbs.org/video/story-in-the-public-square-4212024-wtfwux/#:~:text=Season%2015%20Episode%2015%20%7C%2027m,some%2C%20much%20closer%20to%20home>.

See also American Autocracy, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Asheville, NC, 2024.

<https://sites.google.com/uuasheville.org/american-autocracy-resources/home>

<sup>5</sup> Maria Virginia Olano's interview with Bill McKibben, ClimateXchange, September 16, 2020. <https://climate-xchange.org/2020/09/be-a-little-less-of-an-individual-author-and-activist-bill-mckibben/>

<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Sifton. *The Serenity Prayer*. New York, 2005: W. W. Norton & Co. P. 7.