

Created Equal...a Fourth of July reflection on America

Larry J. Eriksson, presented at the UUFDC, Ephraim, Wisconsin, July 2, 2017

Summary: The Seven Principles of UU reflect our core values and provide inspiration for the future. We live in a time when these principles are being threatened by those in power. The Dreyfus Affair in France provides a good example of how others have responded to similar threats in the past. We must counter the false reality created by misinformation and “alternative facts” with the truths of science, history, and our own lives.

1) Looking back

Last August, when I first agreed to speak today, I suggested this day because I had some ideas that I thought would fit well with the Fourth of July. I had no idea that seismic political changes would soon engulf our nation. These changes took my original thoughts in a more serious, darker direction. Literally overnight, what I envisioned as a straight-forward presentation, became much more complex and timely.

Some of you may recall that almost exactly one year ago, I shared the amazing story of Unitarian minister, educator, and scientist, Joseph Priestley. In 1791, a mob destroyed Priestley’s house in Birmingham, England. This led to Priestley and his family seeking refuge in the United States where he initially received a warm welcome.

A few years later, now President John Adams signed the controversial Alien and Sedition Acts. As an immigrant and Unitarian, Priestley worried that he might be imprisoned, as was one of his close friends, or even deported. Adams, an admirer in some ways, did not appreciate Priestley’s Unitarian beliefs, pro-French attitudes, and outspoken sermons. However, his friend and Vice-President, Thomas Jefferson, reassured him of his safety.

The Sedition Act and Alien Friends Act expired soon after Jefferson became president. However, the Alien Enemies Act remains in effect. It allowed the president to imprison or deport any male citizen of a hostile nation older than fourteen during war time. In actions that were later condemned, a revised version was used to intern Japanese, German, and Italian aliens during World War II.

More recently, the current president has attempted to restrict the immigration rights of citizens from seven (later reduced to six) predominantly Muslim nations. These proposals and other actions have contributed to a more hostile climate for many Americans including Mexicans, Muslims, Jews, and other minorities. They also threaten our great nation’s reputation for openness and fairness.

2) Guiding Principles

What makes a nation great? When I was in high school, we had an exchange student from Argentina. At that time, due to its huge exports of wheat and beef, Argentina was still the 15th wealthiest country in the world. It had been the 7th wealthiest early in the 20th century, but Argentina's growth and promising future was cut short in 1930, when a military coup overthrew a reform-minded president. This marked the beginning of a long, slow decline for the country. It was soon followed by a fraudulent election and another coup as the country endured the Great Depression.

After World War II, in which Argentina was neutral until the final months of the war, military leader Juan Peron was elected president. With his popular wife, Eva, he promised relief for the impoverished rural provinces. Although he did make some reforms, he also created financial problems, suppressed political opposition, and restricted freedom of speech and the press. After the Peron years, the troubled nation endured scandals, military coups, internal chaos, war with England, and economic crises. Today, Argentina can be viewed as a nation that has failed to fulfill its potential.

There are a variety of reasons for Argentina's decline, but Nicholas Shumway, in his book *The Invention of Argentina*, emphasizes its inability to develop unifying guiding principles. The urban residents of Buenos Aires have long competed with the rural provinces for political and economic power. Those in Buenos Aires wanted a strong central government, looked to Europe, and supported the ruling oligarchy. Those in the rural provinces exhibited nationalistic pride in "La Gran (The Great) Argentina," believed that the gaucho represented the true spirit of Argentina, and felt that the Buenos Aires oligarchs exploited the rural provinces. The country has been unable to develop guiding principles to unite these competing visions.

In contrast, the United States has a rich array of guiding principles. These principles have united our nation and helped it survive nearly 250 often turbulent years. Some examples include:

- we call ourselves "a melting pot"
- we think of this country as "a land of opportunity"
- the *Great Seal* reads "e pluribus unum" or "one out of many,"
- the *Pledge of Allegiance* calls for "liberty and justice for all"
- the *Gettysburg Address* says "a government of the people, by the people, for the people"
- the *Golden Rule* calls us to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you"

Our best principles unite rather than divide. They grow out of our stories, our traditions, our shared moral values, and our hopes for the future. Some of these phrases are metaphors, many are inspired by history, others are more goals than reality.

The Seven Principles of UU incorporate many of the same values as our national guiding principles. They express views that many Americans would endorse regardless of their political affiliation. Here is my condensed version:

- recognize every person has inherent value;
- demonstrate compassion and fairness;
- accept one another;
- search for truth;
- use democratic processes;
- pursue peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- respect the web of all existence.

Despite the broad support for our guiding principles and the Seven Principles of UU, they have recently come under attack by the words and actions of our national leaders. As we will see, these unprecedented attacks threaten the democratic foundations of our nation.

3) The dilemma we face

In modern economies, wealth often flows to the cities. The economy of rural regions often declines. This encourages the emergence of nationalistic leaders, like Juan Peron in Argentina, who promise bold solutions to our problems. However, their solutions are too often vague promises rather than rational proposals. They often give us what we like – a good show, but not what we need – good government. One way to appreciate the attractions and dangers of nationalistic leaders like Peron is to watch the musical "Evita."

This past fall, a candidate, famed for his wealth and his role on reality TV shows, running with nationalistic fervor, and supported by many rural voters, became president of the United States despite losing the popular election by nearly 3 million votes.

We now have an ultra-wealthy president, who embraces "alternative facts" and has criticized or ridiculed the media, the judiciary, the political opposition, women, minorities, immigrants, and sometimes even his own party. Neal Gabler writing in his article "Farewell America" on the Bill Moyers' website *Moyers & Company* noted that we put in office "a man who has shredded our values, our morals, our compassion, our tolerance, our decency, our sense of common purpose, our very identity." This is strong criticism, but it is driven by the destructive nature of the president's words and actions.

There are other concerns as well. The results of this election have demonstrated how our democracy can be thwarted by the arcane machinery of the Electoral College as well as the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling that enables increased control of our government by the wealthy. After the election, the UK-based Democracy Index downgraded the United States from a "full democracy" to a "flawed democracy" due to

the loser receiving more votes than the winner as well as “factors ranging from political scandals to decline of public trust in government institutions.” The list of 18 full democracies now includes such small nations as Malta, Mauritius, and Uruguay, but not the United States.

This presents Unitarians with an unprecedented dilemma. The president and his allies have shown little respect for our democratic institutions, our national guiding principles, and the Seven Principles of UU. However, one of our Seven Principles calls for the “acceptance of one another.”

To paraphrase Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof,” on the one hand, they do not affirm our Seven Principles, but on the other hand, one of our Seven Principles is to accept one another. The question is what do we do?

4) France and the Dreyfus Affair

We can learn from the past. This is not the first time that a country has faced misinformation, alternative facts, and challenges to its democratic institutions by those in power. Let’s go back a little over 100 years in France. In the 1890s, a French housekeeper found a document in the German Embassy that triggered an investigation into treason known as the Dreyfus Affair. The search for the culprit found a convenient scapegoat of Jewish descent in Captain Alfred Dreyfus. A military court quickly convicted Dreyfus in 1895 with virtually no evidence and imprisoned him on infamous Devil’s Island off the coast of South America.

Throughout this process, the Seven Principles of UU were consistently violated. Despite his recognized skills, Dreyfus was not valued, but considered expendable by the military court. The trial was rigged against him, conviction certain, and his imprisonment harsh. The court suppressed evidence and accepted lies without much concern for fairness or justice.

In 1896, the head of French counter-espionage Lieutenant Colonel Georges Picquart discovered a document that led to the real culprit, who was quickly tried and unexpectedly acquitted. In addition, despite this new document the General Staff refused to reconsider the conviction of Dreyfus. Instead, they convicted Picquart of violating secrecy laws.

In an effort to build some evidence to support the conviction of Dreyfus, Major Hubert-Joseph Henry – Picquart’s deputy, but no friend – forged a document that became known as the “faux Henry (Henry forgery).” When Henry’s role was revealed, he confessed and committed suicide after he was arrested. Anti-Dreyfus forces later described the “faux Henry” letter as “le faux patriotique (a patriotic fake)” – an “alternative fact,” and Charles Maurras defended it as a helpful translation of the facts for the public despite it being a complete forgery.

These many miscarriages of justice caused intellectuals – the first use of this word as a noun came during this event – to rise up in protest. In 1898, the novelist Émile Zola wrote a powerful open letter, “J’accuse (I accuse),” that described the many injustices inflicted on Dreyfus. One hundred years later, the BBC described this letter as “a model of resistance to authority.” Much like Picquart, Zola was convicted of libel and fled to England to avoid prison.

Nonetheless, the combined efforts of the intellectuals led to Dreyfus being brought back to France after five years imprisonment, re-tried, and, unbelievably, convicted a second time. To avoid more prison time, Dreyfus accepted a pardon, but was not found innocent. An amnesty law prevented any further prosecutions against not only Zola and Picquart, but also those involved in the miscarriages of justice that convicted Dreyfus, Picquart, and Zola.

Protests continued across Europe. The famous Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg, who with his wife was a Unitarian, cancelled his concert tour to France in support of Dreyfus. Pro-Dreyfus intellectuals continued to work to expose the lying and suppression of evidence by the military court. They spoke out, they wrote letters, they worked through the courts.

The wheels of justice turned slowly for Dreyfus, but in 1906, the French Supreme Court completely exonerated Dreyfus as well as Picquart. Although Dreyfus’ career was set back by the false charges, he did serve in World War I and retired as a respected colonel. Picquart rejoined the army as a brigadier general and served as Minister of War from 1906-1909.

5) Moving ahead

Today, in our own country, our democracy and the Seven Principles are threatened by inaccurate information, confusing contradictions, continuing distractions, and misguided actions. Concern is being expressed in surprising places. A newsletter from Holden Village, a Lutheran retreat center on Lake Chelan in the state of Washington, noted that “divisiveness and fear spread at an ever-increasing pace...in a strange post-election landscape.” Much like the Dreyfus Affair, in this strange landscape, truth is being replaced by a false reality.

Haruki Murakami, a famous Japanese author, in his 1997 novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, has a fictional character describe his feelings about another character in a way that foreshadows the feelings of many people following the November election:

“He knew how to knock his opponent down quickly and effectively with the fewest possible words...you knew that his words lacked consistency. They reflected no single worldview based on profound conviction...Consistency and an established worldview were excess baggage...in the mass media’s tiny time segments...He

needed only to attack, to knock his enemy down...to use the kind of logic that moved the great majority...no one had questioned his sources or their reliability...These clever tactics of his used to drive me mad...I was never able to construct an argument to refute him. It was like boxing with a ghost; your punches just swished through the air. There was nothing solid for them to hit...Through television and the other media, he gained the ability to train his magnified power on society at large...to use it for his own political advantage.”

After the November election, these fictional words seem astoundingly prescient as we are pummeled by a torrent of lies and distractions. Joel Whitebook recently wrote in the *New York Times* that many people now have feelings of “disorientation and anxiety.” He notes the similarities with Russia where the opposition is kept off-balance by “a ceaseless shape-shifting that is unstoppable because it’s indefinable.”

It is impossible to win a debate against “a shape-shifting ghost.” Rather than engaging in a meaningless debate that cannot be won, we need to make our own statements based on scientific and historic facts as well as our personal experiences. For many years, the Statue of Liberty has welcomed “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” to the “melting pot” that is the United States. These immigrants built this country. Many of us are immigrants or only one or two generations removed from immigrants. My mother was an immigrant as were all four of my grandparents. America was, is, and should always be a “land of opportunity.”

We also need to tell the story of our country. The Preamble to the Constitution states that the United States was formed to “promote the general welfare.” This is not a laissez-faire attitude. Americans have always seen our government as playing a critical role in building a better society. It is important to keep this in mind at a time when some consider government a dirty word and pursue privatization of government services. They are challenging over 200 years of history and the American Constitution.

In addition, we need to tell the story of Unitarianism. Unitarianism is deeply rooted in the history of the United States beginning with the early friendship between Unitarian minister Joseph Priestley and our third president (and writer of the Declaration of Independence) Thomas Jefferson. They both embraced the ideals of the Enlightenment – namely reason and facts, that are the foundation of our country. We may be small in numbers, but we are in the mainstream of America and so are our Seven Principles.

6) Staying the course

Speaking out will not be easy. Whitebook admits that responding to the cacophony of negativity and chaos that surround us will be an exhausting process. Much like the character in Murakami’s book, he notes that the manic pace of misinformation wears down any opposition.

There will be continuing distractions and efforts to invest the misguided present with an air of normalcy. These are not normal times. There will be calls for unity even as the Seven Principles continue to be violated. We cannot unite until truth, respect, justice, and fairness are restored. Most disturbingly, the opposition will continue to be marginalized despite representing the views of the majority.

We can gain strength by recognizing that we are not alone. Sometimes we can find support in surprising places. *Strings* magazine is far from a political magazine – it covers the world of stringed instruments. Nonetheless, in a recent article, violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja pointedly asked “what music is appropriate for this end of times?” when “our majorities choose leaders who disregard the problems or at best offer hollow hopes and promises.” Regina Carter, another noted violinist, said in a different *Strings* article that in times “so dark and so negative” we need to “accentuate the positive.”

Together, we must continue to resist forces seeking to undermine our democracy. We must support those who endorse our Seven Principles. We must contact our legislators. We must support battles in the courts. We must march. We must speak out. We must write letters. Over the past few months, at least 8 writers with ties to UUFDC have had one or more political letters published in the Peninsula Pulse. This is a great start, but it must continue and grow. It will be, as it always has been, a long and difficult job. To succeed, we must work together, be patient, and persevere.

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Appendix - The Seven Principles of UU

- The Inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

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