

America In One Room
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Democracy is in decline. Freedom House reports that fewer people around the world live under popular governments than at any time since the fall of the Soviet Union. Here at home nineteen states have passed thirty-four laws making it harder to vote, while almost half of all Americans of both parties tell pollsters they think democracy is in crisis—for entirely different reasons.

Americans have seldom been so divided. Faith in public institutions is at low ebb. Here are some of the signs and symptoms of a republic in decline.

- The Supreme Court has lost its credibility. Grabbing a seat on the court is now a matter of gamesmanship, not statesmanship.
- Public schools that were intended to create educated citizens have become boxing rings for brawling over book bans and unisex bathrooms.
- Less than a quarter of the public read a newspaper.
- Two of the last six presidential contests have been awarded to the loser who got a minority of the popular vote.
- Organized religion is losing adherents, while QAnon and cult-like conspiracies fill the vacuum once occupied by mainstream churches and synagogues.
- Volunteerism is down. Even before the pandemic, blood donations had been dropping for decades. It's the same with philanthropy and charitable giving.
- Hate crimes are on the rise. Bigotry is becoming socially acceptable again.

By many measures, the United States is shredding at the seams. Passengers are punching out the flight attendants on airplanes. Homicides are surging. Armed militias plot to kidnap and lynch members of Congress, which some call “legitimate political discourse.” Which is scarier? The trigger-happy vigilantes or the politicians who incite and coddle them?

In Ukraine these past few weeks, we've witnessed what happens when democracy is assaulted by an external foe. In the United States, the enemies seem to be mostly internal, although we know that Russia has hacked social media to sow division in our nation, stoking discord over issues like immigration, fueling Islamophobia, and fanning the flames of tribalism. Russian trolls and bots manufactured fake Facebook pages like *Being Patriotic*, which attacked refugees while celebrating the Confederate flag; they masqueraded as leftists with a phoney Black Lives Matters page that likened police to ISIS terrorists. Their ugly strategy was just to stir the pot, to escalate the rhetoric. But the Russians aren't all to blame, and neither are Donald Trump, nor the pandemic, which merely served to exacerbate already existing tensions. You just need to read the comments section of the Washington Post to understand that vitriol and rancor are endemic in our culture which seems unable to have a conversation on any important issue without name-calling or accusations of treason.

I think it's important to face the reality and magnitude of this threat. As James Baldwin wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." We have to acknowledge the depth and extent of the dangers facing our republic. But neither should we exaggerate them. For despite all the threats there are still signs of health in the body politic.

- Over the past decade, prison populations in the United States have dropped thirteen percent, by 300,000 inmates, roughly equal in scale to the population of mid-size cities like Tampa and St. Louis. That's a lot of liberation.
- Barack and Michelle Obama consistently top the list of the world's most admired men and women. Donald Trump still made the rankings last year, but below the captain of India's national cricket team.
- Though hate crimes are rising, so are the numbers of Americans who identify as biracial or multiracial. Ninety-four percent of respondents say that interracial marriage is no biggie, up from just four percent when I was in grade school. We may yet smooch our way to a big human family hug.
- Despite a pandemic, Americans showed up at the polls or cast a ballot by mail in record numbers in 2020
- Though organized religion is slipping in influence, more churches are embracing women's ordination and celebrating gay unions, even as the landscape becomes more diverse, with the number of mosques and synagogues and Buddhist and Hindu temples now rivaling the number of Catholic parishes across the country.

Maybe America isn't falling apart at the seams after all. The divorce rate is at a fifty year low. People are shopping less, spending more time and money pursuing experiences rather than buying stuff: purchasing yoga retreats and Master Classes that just might make them more well-rounded human beings. Maybe even the rise of the Nones—the religiously unaffiliated—isn't such a bad thing. A little irreverence never hurt anybody.

Perhaps more important than surveys or polling data is a study from Stanford University that showed that when a thousand citizens from across the political spectrum were assembled to discuss the reality and threat of climate change, minds changed. Over the course of six days, individuals from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds white and black, male and female, conservatives and liberals, were gathered to dialogue, to read briefing papers on both sides of the issue, to ask questions of a panel of nonpartisan experts. The experiment was called America In One Room. Participation was voluntary. Discussions were respectful. And attitudes shifted. Climate skeptics became climate believers. Three quarters left convinced that it was important to reach the goal of net zero carbon emissions in the near future. That represents hope.

I like the idea of America in One Room after my own recent stay in the hospital. Last November I spent five days sharing a cubicle with an ultra conservative Roman Catholic Trumper named Gary, like me. It was a popular boy's name back in the 50s and we were close in age but far apart in theology and politics. During a lull, I asked Gary what he thought of our current pope. He said he thought Pope Francis was a communist. I asked him if Jesus was a communist also, which gave him pause. We had some interesting chats about Roswell and Area 51. But because we were separated by just a flimsy curtain, we had to avoid the most contentious topics and find ways to disagree without being disagreeable. We found considerable common ground. We could agree that the hospital pizza wasn't bad, that our wives were gems, and that getting old was not for the faint-hearted. We could laugh about racing each other around the nurses stations in our walkers. We could even agree that elections would be a lot more trustworthy if we used old-fashioned paper ballots, no online or electronic voting, so there would be a paper trail of who actually won or lost.

I think our democracy might be stronger if we were all forced to share One Room occasionally, the way random strangers in a jury chamber are forced to talk about crime and punishment and try to find not just consensus but unanimity through group deliberation. I might agree with the verdict sometimes, as with Derek Chauvin. I disagree other times, like with Kyle Rittenhouse. But the marvel is that juries arrive at a meeting of the minds almost ninety percent of the time and I try not to second-guess twelve people who've listened to hours of testimony and weighed the evidence.

When I think of America in One Room, I imagine of how it used to be in the military—or at least how it was supposed to be—where guys from different sides of the tracks, from North and South, different races, might have to share the same latrine or even the same foxhole and have each other's backs. Despite their differences, they formed a unit. In fact, the U.S. military remains one of the few institutions today widely esteemed

across party lines, probably because of role models like current Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, a four-star general who rose from the racially segregated schools of his childhood home in Mobile, Alabama, to become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and who now is committed to rooting out extremist ideology in the ranks.

America is in trouble today, real trouble no doubt. But we have to navigate that fine line between complacency and despair. Unless we acknowledge the problems, we never solve them. But if we see only the problems, we throw up our hands in surrender.

Unitarian Universalists have a special part to play in finding that balance, because ours is a democratic faith. Our tradition goes back to those early Pilgrims, who (for all their flaws) gave self-government a jump start. They believed the members of the church should choose their own ministers and govern their own affairs, not have their leaders appointed by bishops or selected by any King. Those congregational meetings were forerunners of the New England town meeting: where revolutionaries like Boston's Sam Adams and his cousin John earned their spurs, helping to forge an independent nation.

Times have changed. Most of us no longer believe the things that our forebears did. Our ideas have progressed on women's rights, and gay rights, and civil rights, and we've outgrown our rather limited Protestant past. What hasn't changed is our commitment to building a certain kind of community: a community that is inclusive, that honors human variety, that resolves conflict through mutual consent, that respects the will of the majority while protecting the rights of the minority, that holds freedom of speech and conscience sacrosanct, and that gives the least as well as the greatest a place at the table.

So how do we respond to the threats our country faces today, as religious and political liberals? First, it's important to realize that many of America's democratic virtues are synonymous with its vices. We've always been an unruly people, skeptical of authority. That's often a good thing. Rebellion is part of our spiritual heritage. But at times we have betrayed that heritage, as occurred a little over a hundred year ago when Eugene Debs, presidential candidate and the Bernie Sanders of his day who led the Socialist Party of America was thrown into prison on charges of sedition. The Supreme Court Justice who wrote the ruling upholding his conviction was a Unitarian from an iconic Boston family, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who famously likened Debs' offense to shouting fire in a crowded theater. But Debs' real crime was not shouting fire at all; what he was guilty of was distributing pamphlets opposing the draft and U.S. entry into World War One, surely in retrospect one of the most avoidable calamities of the last century.

Let's not make the same mistake again. Let's be careful not to stifle legitimate dissent, and let's not demonize those with whom we disagree, nor adopt the tactics of our adversaries by banning books or public shaming or closing down healthy debate. Don't cancel those with opposing views. In fact, if we value diversity we should welcome more political variety in our congregations: Republicans as well as Libertarians, Greens and

Independents. Because we are not a wing of the Democratic party. Indeed we should be critics of any party line that threatens to become a new orthodoxy.

Yet without being doctrinaire, we do need to be principled. We won't roll back the clock on voting rights, or reproductive freedom, or same sex marriage. We can't allow that. But the only way to score permanent victories is to forge broader alliances, to meet people where they are, be willing to be changed ourselves by that encounter, and invite more and more folks into that One Big Room where you don't have to look alike or think alike to love alike.

So be curious and don't assume you know what's right for others. Get to know your neighbors. Learn a foreign language. Talk to someone under thirty. Zoom with your extended family. If your family is like mine, there are ex-Marines, vegans, queer activists and Seventh Day Adventists all struggling hard just to get through the dinner without a food fight. It's a regular United Nations.

But the most immediate thing we can do to safeguard our freedom is share this this time and space together: practicing tolerance, speaking temperately, educating ourselves and each other, actively listening to divergent ideas, and understanding that democracy springs from the grassroots, not from inside the Beltway, but from people like us: introverts and extroverts, pagans and humanists, a not quite random assortment of heterogeneous but not all hetero- people who love this faith and love this country, all trying to be Americans In One Room.