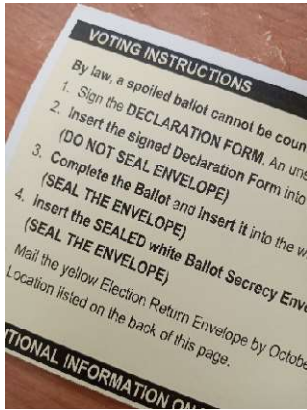


# *Defenders of the Faith*

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Voting Instructions (Leamington)  
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About four weeks ago, I attended the municipal candidates' debate at the Roma Club in Leamington. It was a fairly full house, where we were able to meet most of our candidates face-to-face, and hear directly from them as to how they feel about issues important to the community.

I thought about how this represented one aspect of our Fifth Principle, which supports the use of the democratic process in our communities, and how participating in this aspect of the process was an enactment of faith.

It also reminded me of a similar meeting about four years ago, when our last municipal election was underway.

This year's gathering felt like a larger crowd, but more notably, I paid attention to the kinds of questions that were put to the candidates, as well as the issues that many candidates themselves brought up. Some of these issues were perennial items you'd usually expect: property taxes, sanitation, infrastructure – important topics to be sure, but not out of the ordinary in municipal politics. But I did notice a significant shift in some issues that were not discussed nearly as widely the last time around, such as affordable housing and homelessness, addiction support and safety, and public transit.

I began to consider – what might have brought along this shift?

When I first studied political sciences in university, one of the courses that stuck with me the most was around the history of democracy. Up until then, I had somehow taken democracy as a given: a logical

conclusion that simply made sense and would be the inevitable goal of any rational society.

There may be some truths to this line of thinking, in that the last several hundred years have given way to an increasing number of governments that follow democratic principles and guidelines, and the places that do so tend to do better than the places that do not. But the historical record isn't as neat and tidy... it really did take centuries of struggle – or even millennia, depending on when you start counting – to establish the kind of institutions that we associate with democracy today.

Some of this struggle was rhetorical – debates and essays... philosophical publications by classical thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, or Jean Jacques Rousseau, articulating and promoting the ideals that have become part of current democratic societies (and if you're into this subject, you might notice that I'm leaving out many other names). But some of this struggle was more literal and concrete – economic advocacy, power struggles, demonstrations, rebellions, revolutions, and yes, even wars.

And the notion of who benefitted from these democracies has also shifted over time... the idea that all are created equal has not always been applied equally to all (the fact that the phrase is still often cited as “all *men* are created equal” belies this limited application of the principle – and even then, this notion didn't always apply to *all* men).

Even though I should have known better, I still had some romantic idea in my mind that democracy was established by some kind of... John Locke or Rousseau fan club... or something, where people sat down, took the philosophers' ideas, and just decided that this was the best way to run their government.

But what philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau were speaking about in laying out their democratic principles, was often more of an observation of previous developments as much as a plan for future ones. Yes, those written ideas *did* inspire the formation of certain

institutions, such as the emerging governments in the Americas and revolutionary France, but these writings were already building on other more concrete work by others.

The idea that there is a *social contract* between the governed and the government might more often be seen as a kind of series of historical accidents and developments over the centuries, than one actual sit-down session when such a social contract was drawn up. Yes, there have been actual sit-down sessions when papers are signed, but these have often been as much codifications of emerging practice, as times when the original ideas and agreements were created.

To take the familiar example of our country's heritage, which draws from the British Parliament, it took close to a thousand years for the monarchy to transition to the symbolic figurehead that we've come to know (and which many of us now often have the luxury of ignoring, other than occasional engagement with its pageantry or family drama).

The Magna Carta started as an agreement that King John was... "encouraged" to sign following economically powerful individuals pursuing their own interests. This was a small group of individuals, more interested in themselves than on equal rights for all. And even then, it took a few false starts for a Magna Carta, as we know it, to be truly established.

But that seed of regulation of power, did eventually inspire and lead toward expanding rights for the interests of more people – perhaps most people – leading more recently into universal suffrage for all adult citizens (which, to be sure, still leaves a lot of people out, and even those who are eligible to participate may encounter barriers to doing so, beyond the letter of the law). All of this took ongoing engagement, struggle, and vigilance.

Where does this history leave us, on days like today, on the eve of several municipal elections? And what does it mean for us as ongoing

defenders of our faith and principles such as engagement in the democratic process?

To begin with, part of the vigilance involves remembering that municipal elections – while not as flashy as provincial or federal elections – still deserve as much attention. For one thing, many of the decisions made by town and city councils are liable to affect us very directly, just like any provincial or federal law.

And these are decisions in which we may have much more power than we might expect. Being that each of us, as individuals, have a larger share of the voice toward our local leaders, we may indeed have a greater effect in influencing our local community interests. And that's without even mentioning that we may have a closer proximity to those leaders – many of us might well know our local councillors or even mayors personally... maybe even on a first-name basis.

When I attended that candidates' meeting about four weeks ago, I saw that the shifting conversation at the meeting reflected many of the conversations I've seen around the community, including with colleagues from Leamington Ministerial.

You have heard me speak about the regular meetings that Leamington Ministerial has had with the mayor and other municipal leaders over the past four years. One of the main topics has been around addressing homelessness in the community and finding solutions toward more affordable housing. Other related topics also came up.

Now, I wouldn't want to give the impression that the local clergy can claim all the credit for the movement of these conversations. Other community organizations have been involved, taking leadership, offering resources, and putting in a lot of grunt work on the matter. But I will say that the changes in policy focus since our initial meetings at the Town Hall have been quite affirming and gratifying, and I can't help but feel that the initiative offered by our association played an important

part in bringing focus to these issues. And, of course, we weren't the first to identify these kinds of community needs. Social justice has been a core value in many communities of faith for a very long time, including our own.

My friends, tomorrow, many of you will have an opportunity to participate in one aspect of the democratic process, and we are blessed to have that option. Voting is *one* of the more visible and immediately impactful ways for the community to voice its priorities and direct effective policy. It is *one* exercise in our defense of a faith that believes in a democratic process.

And, of course, my friends, election days are also but a moment in the process. In some ways, elections are affirmations or confirmations of other years-long projects, collective work, and ongoing conversations, which must happen before, during, and after elections.

After tomorrow, my friends, the work of the democratic process will continue. Democracy will happen among the diverse communities that you participate in, be they in associations or clubs, tabletop conversations with friends and with family, or casual conversations at work or in a common space. That too, is work that can shift attitudes, values, policy direction and results. That too, is a defense of our faith's principles.

My friends, the power we have may seem modest, but it's real. May we use it for the common weal of our communities.

So may it be,  
In defense of faith,  
Amen

*Suggested Hymns:*

**Opening #126 Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing**

Words: v. 1 Robert Robinson, 1735-1790, adapt.,

~)-| vs. 2-3, Eugene B. Navias, 1928-

Music: John Wyeth, *Repository of Sacred Music, Part II*, 1813

NETTLETON

**Hymn #318 We Would Be One**

~)-| Words: Samuel Anthony Wright, 1919-

Music: Jean Sibelius, 1865-1957, arr. from *The Hymnal*, 1933, © 1933, renewed 1961 Presbyterian Board of Christian Education

FINLANDIA

**Closing #121 We'll Build a Land**

Words: Barbara Zanotti (Isaiah/Amos), adapt.,

© 1979 Surtsey Publishing Co.

Music: Carolyn McDade, 1935- , © 1979 Surtsey Publishing Co.,

~)-| arr. by Betsy Jo Angebrannndt, 1931- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

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