

## ***Beyond Voting – UU Civics***

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

August 4, 2024

### **Reflection on the Theme by Brett Raunig**

In today's service, Eric is exploring beyond voting and the topic of UU Civics. At first glance, I struggled to connect to the topic. As I have shared in previous reflections, I come from parents with opposite political affiliations. I'm sure all of you might think, wow I bet that was fun dinner conversations.

However, you wouldn't have been able to tell that from being around them. They divorced when I was young, and they did an amazing job of being civil to one another and getting along even though they had very different points of view.

As a Unitarian Universalist, it is easy to say that politically I took after my mom and became a liberal Democrat. Although true, I struggle with the label at times. Their split allowed me to see different perspectives and through the years I have found that labels never work. Both of my parents have passed away and as I look back, I see nothing but beauty and feel I was taught amazing lessons about life by both of them.

My mom was a very successful stockbroker in the 70s in a field dominated by men and a single mom but found time to volunteer with Crosswalk, a troubled youth support organization in Spokane, WA - volunteering, compassion for people and their struggles, and optimism.

My Dad managed a fertilizer plant in Hingham, Mt. population 132 - farming, hunting, fishing, environmental stewardship, and everything mechanical.

I'm looking forward to Eric's sermon on the topic.

I find the larger political world around us discouraging and very dividing and at times feel humanity is doomed.

All of this got me thinking more deeply about civics here at this church. Wendy and I have been members since 2006 and have been involved in several different volunteering opportunities.

When our children were young, we were teachers in the religious education program. When our kids got older our whole family helped with the WHO shelter, and we now both help with Family Promise regularly.

Over the last three years, we were given the opportunity to be your worship associates. I am ending my term as a worship associate, and this will be my last reflection. However, before I go, I would like to put in a plug and/or a call to action.

All of us have a story to tell. Sharing stories with you about bike rides, vulnerable moments, bias, nature, and volunteering – gives me hope. This is where I have grown the most spiritually and is where I have found deep connections to our greater humanity. Being a part of this church is helping us create a more loving compassionate community. Please consider volunteering – it is amazing what you get back through the process.

### **Beyond Voting – UU Civics by Eric LaBrant**

I'll start with a couple disclaimers. I'll focus on Clark County, Washington this morning. We share a lot structurally with other United States locations, but there are important differences to be aware of if you're joining from Portland or beyond. And, I'll focus on structure and how we can get involved, steering well clear of specific policies or candidates.

Current events in government and politics can be discouraging. Some states now mandate the teaching of Christianity in public schools, while others prohibit life-saving healthcare for women. There's a movement banning books and honest education about American history. I won't suggest that we all collectively cheer up, or that everything's going to be okay.

Rather, when the forces of injustice seem to be growing, our effort is needed most -- to continue bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice.

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The Lens: National Problems overshadowing folks getting things done locally.

National issues overshadow local politics across the United States. School boards get pulled into turmoil over LGBTQ rights and gun control. Clark County's council posted a religious slogan in their meeting room. Portland was at the epicenter of Black Lives Matter protests, and the heavy-handed police response. But in spite of national polarization between conservatives and liberals, there are thousands and thousands of cities, counties, school districts, water and sewer bureaus, and others, continuing to do the real work of paving roads, inspecting restaurants, hiring teachers, and putting buses on the road. Thinking about things on a local scale can help us find truly meaningful ways to pitch in.

UUCV is located in Washington State's 49th legislative district, its 3rd Congressional district, Clark County Council District 1, the City of Vancouver, the Vancouver Public School District, the Clark Public Utilities district, and Port of Vancouver District 3. Wherever you live, your home will be in a variety of districts and jurisdictions as well. If you're in Clark County but outside city limits, you'll be in a fire district, and Clark Regional Wastewater. You might live in the Port of Camas-Washougal's district, or the Port of Ridgefield, depending on where you call home. This particular building is also in the Harney Heights neighborhood.

The Clark County Property Information Center website will list all of these details for your address, and your voter registration card lists many of them as well. This year we'll elect Federal and state officials, including our legislators, state senators, governor, and county council. There are candidates and issues in each of those elections. Once they take office, there are issues that each elected official will focus their work and attention upon.

Clark County has 5 council districts that are non-partisan, meaning candidates aren't necessarily associated with a political party, though the political parties definitely get involved. The councilors hire and oversee a County Manager, and approve policy and budgets. County-wide we also elect an auditor, treasurer, sheriff, and others, but the council controls their budgets. We'll be voting on those this November as well.

Washington holds local elections in odd-numbered years, so there are no city council, port, or school district races this year. Portland *is* holding local elections, completely restructuring their voting process and city council structure at the same time, so if you're in Portland now's a great time to get involved. Next year we'll vote on school board members, port commissioners, and city council.

Each of these organizations is required, by law, to meet openly and operate transparently. Anyone can show up for a meeting of the Clark Public Utilities Commission, or the Port Commission, or City Council. The following is taken directly from state law: "The people of this state do not yield their sovereignty to the agencies which serve them. The people, in delegating authority, do not give their public servants the right to decide what is good for the people to know and what is not good for them to know. The people insist on remaining informed and informing the people's public servants of their views so that they may retain control over the instruments they have created."

Not only are there a variety of districts and agencies to get involved with, there are many ways to go about it, and the work we do as individuals can have a surprising amount of impact.

There are non-profits such as Sierra Club and the NAACP that engage in outreach, advocacy, and even host such direct action as cleanup events or scholarships, but they also help draft policy and lobby with decision-makers. We can be active by contributing financially, or volunteering, or potentially even working for the organization as an employee.

There are political campaigns and ballot measures we can support. Petition organizers welcome volunteers to collect and gather signatures. Cities, counties, and districts have the ability to put measures on the ballot, such as school funding levies, but state law forbids government agencies from advocating for ballot measures, so they rely on independent campaigns and volunteers to help them pass.

Whether for a cause or a candidate, helping a political campaign can take a variety of forms. If there's something you feel strongly about I encourage you to sign up even if you don't have a clear idea of how you can help. There's everything from phone calls to doorbelling, hosting a table at the farmer's market, managing social media, putting up signs, even just running errands to pick campaign materials up from the print shop. Of course, most also accept monetary donations. The main thing to keep in mind is that you don't have to be "a political person" to support a cause you believe in. Just show up.

Sometimes, just showing up is the *entire* point. Boards, commissions, and public hearings generally accept public comment or testimony, in writing and in person. And even if you don't speak, just showing up as part of a crowd signals the importance of an issue to decision-makers.

You can also "show up" by volunteering for a voter registration drive. Many organizations will host voter registration drives to encourage folks with similar values to vote. They may also host "get out the vote"

efforts for the same reason, reaching out to members to encourage them to vote. The Unitarian Universalist Association has a program called UU The Vote along those lines. I encourage you to check out the website.

Sometimes, showing up isn't even necessary. Voting in Washington is done by mail or ballot drop-box. And while the focus today is on all of the other ways to engage with our political process, voting is still important. Primary election ballots have been mailed, but can also be printed on the spot at the county auditor's office. If you haven't voted, I want to assure you that it's very easy to register, and very easy to vote in Washington and Oregon. It only takes a few minutes, doesn't require any special knowledge, and it's free. You can register when you get your driver's license, online on the Clark County Elections website, or at the auditor's office. In Washington, most felons are allowed to vote, and folks as young as 17 in some cases.

Other ways you can have an impact from home include writing letters to the editor of The Columbian and the Reflector. Public servants definitely pay attention to what's printed, and letters provide readers with more food for thought when it's time to vote. You may have heard of FOIA, the Freedom of Information Act? Washington's statewide version, the Public Records Act makes it incredibly easy to request records from public agencies, records that may shed light on an agency's activities. These days, it's free to email elected officials, and they do pay attention.

Running for office is also an option. I remember before I decided to run thinking that that's for "political people", and I wasn't one of them. At the same time, I often wondered if government would work better if we had more teachers and nurses and bus drivers representing us and fewer politicians. You don't have to be a political person to run for office. I'm now thoroughly convinced that working folks make better policy, and I encourage you to at least consider the possibility.

Perhaps one of the most important ways we can influence local government and politics is by talking to our friends and family. Arguing on social media Does Not Count. I encourage you to ask folks, without negative judgment, about their political beliefs and ideas. Do be careful about doing so at work, as some workplaces discourage political discussions, and are legally allowed to do so. Open-minded political discussion goes a long way when it comes to local government, and you might find that at the local level we agree on far more than we might expect. There's a lot less ranting about this candidate vs. that candidate, and a lot more general curiosity about who the heck Joe Candidate is and where they're at on local issues like bike lanes or climate change.

That's a ton of info all at once, and I want to switch gears a bit to talk about why it matters so much.

We live in a culture where money does a lot of the talking. Money pays for ads. Money pays for lobbyists. What it doesn't do is replace your voice. Your voice matters. Elected officials pay close attention when a constituent contacts them specifically because it's *\*not\** paid for.

That's what happened in 2014 when a company tried to build an oil train terminal in Vancouver. It tried to diminish the voices of those who spoke up, calling them NIMBY's, an acronym for Not In My Back Yard, because they were concerned about the real impacts of their proposal. The largest city council meeting in Vancouver history drew some 700 folks from the community to express their concern, and it

was at 1am that night that testimony concluded and the council voted to oppose the project. Your voice matters.

In 2017, the Vancouver City Council voted to put Proposition 1 on the ballot, to assess a tax to create an Affordable Housing Fund. Because a public agency can't support candidates or ballot measures, the campaign to support the measure was entirely separate, consisting mostly of volunteers from the community making calls, passing out information, staffing a table at the farmer's market, and handing out signs. That proposition passed, and the funds raised are making a major difference in Vancouver's ability to respond to the housing crisis.

National issues matter, but local issues can have a much bigger impact on our daily lives, much more quickly. Equity in our schools and neighborhoods starts with us. Clark County has what are called specialty courts, including drug court, veteran's court, and mental health court, to help humanize our legal system. Those programs exist because of community support for our current Prosecuting Attorney -- an elected role at the county level.

We are challenged to act. We are called to act on our values in the wider world. In a political climate distorted by money and corporate power, it is more critical than ever that we as living people participate. Your voice, and your action, make an important difference in the world around us.

What will you show up for? Will you lend your voice to help the marginalized? Will you show up to a city or county council meeting? Will you speak or contact an elected official? Will you read up on a local election and talk to your friends about it? Or write a letter to the local paper about an issue you care about? Let's not leave government and politics to the political people.

Even though national news can be discouraging, and our individual influence may feel small, there are a host of ways we can help promote love and justice that go far beyond voting.