

## ***Democracy in Action***

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

February 22, 2026

### ***Reflection on the Theme*** by Emily Layfield (read in worship by Kelly Kanyid)

My first semester of college, I took Intro to American Politics and was immediately hooked. The professor, Bob- I went to a Quaker college where everyone went by first names - was insightful and funny and had a knack of bringing his subject to life. Over the course of those four years, I took every single one of Bob's classes I could, American Political Thought, two semesters of Constitutional Law, The American Congress, and before I knew it, I was double majoring in Politics.

I felt a bit out of place as a politics major, because I have never been much of a news hound - I was always most fascinated by questions like how people decide what to codify in law vs what to enforce with cultural norms. And how much of law lies not just in what the law says but how it's interpreted and contextualized. My favorite parts of my classes were reading congressional hearing transcripts or supreme court opinions and dissents and seeing what kinds of interpersonal relationships or cultural norms you could read between the lines of the formal language.

My big takeaway was that our democracy has always been made of people, relationships, and conventions as much as it's been made of laws and documents. It's never functioned perfectly, don't get me wrong, but our traditions and rules and identities and practices let it function consistently enough to keep the system stable.

It's been so disconcerting in recent years to feel almost like our democracy is a Jenga tower with blocks being removed, wondering if removing that piece will be what makes the whole thing fall down.

So this week was a bit of a hard prompt for me - democracy and resilience - because I'm not actually sure at the moment how resilient our particular democracy **is**, and that fills me with a lot of grief and anxiety.

But what I do know is that people and communities and relationships can be resilient, and that has always been an integral part of democracy. Our democracy has always been cultural, and culture is something we actively make together.

Part of what feels so destabilizing is how quickly norms have been stripped away, and how hard it is to recognize in our current government what I used to think were fundamental elements of the American character.

But what it reinforces is that those norms were never fixed. They were habits. And habits can change in both directions. I've been trying to see that feeling of speed as hopeful - maybe we have a lot more cultural agility than I thought, and changing directions doesn't have to be as slow as I've always assumed. Maybe we can shift towards habits of compassion and justice as quickly as habits of fear and greed.

Whether the tower falls first or whether we can hang on long enough to shore it up and keep it standing, democracy isn't the tower itself. It's the agreements and norms and values that we the people, in community and relationships, make together. And those we can continue to practice, intentionally, no matter what happens.

***Democracy in Action***© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Former President, Barack Obama, was interviewed recently on a podcast by Bryan Tyler Cohen, an independent political host on YouTube. What stuck with me in that interview was his description of the difficulty of democracy and institution building – that the tearing down and destruction, as we've seen recently, is easy, but that the creation, cultivation and maintenance of democracy is so much harder. Those weren't his exact words; just my take-away. And what it reminded me of is our faith tradition and religion – and perhaps this is a good time to remind you that Obama attended Religious Education, RE, in the UU church of his childhood. He claimed a UCC and Christian identity later in life, but his upbringing was in this complicated and difficult-to-explain, difficult-to-practice faith. A faith that is democratic at its core and so shares many of the challenges of this country.

It seemed risky this morning to hold a congregational meeting in the middle of worship. "It's just not done that way!" the voices in my head proclaim. On the other hand, the bylaws we ourselves have adopted, perhaps did not foresee this request by a former intern to be ordained. Ordination is one of the most sacred duties of a congregation to bestow on a leader. And so of course the bar is high – the 40% demand of a quorum. But also... times have changed since the bylaws were first drafted. We vote by mail in the states of Washington and Oregon, but our own bylaws don't count our absentee – our mail-in ballots – toward the quorum... perhaps something you could change in your bylaws in the future. But the decision will be yours. And the process democratic.

No, I've been pondering this idea that what we do isn't easy because, in part, we believe in the rule of law. We believe that laws are to protect people and processes, and "the least among us" which is admission of a hierarchy we sometimes minimize.

Our history is complicated: Both the history of this faith and this congregation, but also the history of our country. We like to tell simple clean narratives that separate the wheat from the tares, the grain from the weeds, the food from the non-food, and yet that's not how the world arrives; it's not how it is.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt is considered by many to be a hero, author of the New Deal and creating programs to provide relief to unemployed farmers, the National Recovery Administration and others. He reformed regulations related to finance, communications and labor and ended Prohibition. And, on February 19, 1942, he signed executive order 9066 which authorized the US Military to forcibly remove and incarcerate more than 125,000 immigrants and US citizens of Japanese descent during World War II, including Dean's family, as you heard this morning in Joys and Sorrows.

Ken Nitta's father and grandparents were also incarcerated during World War II. This afternoon's rally at Elizabeth Caruthers Park in Portland at 2pm commemorates that shameful part of our country's history and connects it to the current siege on immigrants and citizens of color, the detention, deportation, and use of concentration camps once again.

Nearly 40 years ago, in 1988, this country made a formal apology when President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act to compensate more than 100,000 people of Japanese descent who were incarcerated during World War II. The law won congressional approval only after a decade-long campaign by the Japanese-American community. I can only hope it will take fewer than 40 more years for another formal apology to be made for the actions of the federal government today, as they seek to buy up space for concentration camps once again, and target people based on race and ethnicity for incarceration and deportation. The problem is not that immigration laws should be enforced, the problem is that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is not in fact following the rule of law. They are punishing immigrants who are following the rules. They claimed to be getting criminals off the streets, but the only crime some of these people have committed is that of seeking refuge in the United States.

Last week we read a sermon by the Rev. Lynn Ungar to you – on resiliency and bouncing like a super ball. Though they were her words, I agreed with them wholeheartedly. Especially this section when she said, "I will confess this about myself. I used to be an optimistic person, someone with a generally cheerful view of the goodness of human nature. I regret to say that lately I've come to see that my optimism is largely unjustified, and that people operate far more from a place of fear than of rationality, and are far easier to manipulate by the greedy and power-hungry than I had believed." She wrote and I read last week, and those words are true to my own experience, also.

I also used to think that those who worked in the law, cared about fairness and justice – I know, and I want to apologize to my BIPOC and Queer friends who always knew in their bodies, that the laws in this country were created to uphold the hierarchy – but my direct experience as a middle class cis-gender white person, led me to believe that the laws were for safety and justice and equity. And though I still do believe that some people go into law or law enforcement with those noble values and intentions, it is clear that many others hold different standards, valuing greed, strength and power over fairness, kindness and justice, for example.

Our reality is complicated: Both the reality of this faith and this congregation, but also the reality of our country. We like to tell simple clean narratives that separate the wheat from the tares, and yet that's not how the world arrives; it's not how it is.

But the truth is, the fate of our country and this congregation, really lies in the hands of the people. For the greedy and powerful to maintain control, they must gain the cooperation of the masses. What we saw in Minneapolis, as ordinary citizens protect their immigrant neighbors by not abdicating their responsibility or consent, provides for us the map for a path forward.

And here's why I was nervous about taking this vote today in the middle of worship. I had little concern that a majority of you want to ordain Jennifer Springsteen, but I did worry that our unconventional way of getting a 40% quorum would feel like we weren't following our own bylaws, our own rules. Mellie didn't mention that the paper ballot is actually how your bylaws indicate you should be voting, despite a long history of raising hands in congregational meetings. The last thing I want us to do is sow distrust in the leadership of this congregation, since the leadership of our country at this time is so very untrustworthy.

Leadership trickles down, and when the President himself abuses his power so blatantly, it's hard to trust anyone in a position of leadership. It's hard to teach our kids to not use coercion or bullying to get their way when it's modeled and pretty effectively in the highest office of the land.

Leadership is what this vote is about anyway. In voting to ordain Jennifer Springsteen, this congregation is declaring their faith in and support of her ministry, her ability to lead, our trust in her leadership – that she will honor the office with integrity and kindness, fairness, and justice. She is not going to use those leadership skills in the context of this congregation again. She's happily employed as a chaplain in a hospital in Virginia. So we're not preparing her to come back and replace me or anything. We are just using our democratic power to bestow upon her the title of *Reverend*, that she will wear for the rest of her career, carrying the weight of this congregation's and the congregation of First Unitarian Church in Portland's endorsement.

Because leadership matters, as does the will of the people. Leaders can't lead if the people don't follow. And that, I think, is my message this morning. We have all kinds of power, but perhaps the most important is collective power. The collective power of culture, as Emily pointed out. Together we are stronger. That language is even written into the covenant of this congregation: "We intentionally join ourselves in community, for we are stronger together."

This afternoon at 2pm at Elizabeth Caruthers Park in Portland, Japanese-Americans, survivors and descendants of survivors of American concentration camps, will gather together, rally and march, to remind Americans that we've been here before – that we tore apart families, incarcerated the innocent, all in the name of a false security it couldn't provide. These descendants and survivors know the damage that is being done to families now and are helping the rest of us make the connection, understand the trauma, and resist. Resilience is our theme, and this march today is nothing if not resilient – a people who have been abused by the government asking us, begging us, to stop the abuse of others. I hope some of you will be able to join us later today. I know that Dean carries with him this afternoon our best UU intentions, as he put it.

Andrew Zolli reminds us that we can be forgiven for thinking we were in control, but we need to shift now toward humility and understand that the storms around us are already here, we're in them and there is no way to avoid them now. Since we can't steer around them, we must build better boats – we must build that resilience, draw on our collective energy, and do what we can to turn this world around.