

Embracing the Rats, Not the Race (#UUtheVote)

Sermon Delivered to Winchester Unitarian Society on 1/26/20

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Last April I vividly remember driving teens home from our week-long climate justice-focused service trip and somehow – no doubt partly inspired by their recent week working together and learning about climate activism - the conversation in the car shifted to the democratic candidates for the 2020 presidential election. I see a couple of you are here today – hey! I listened, quietly, as they each spoke of what their thoughts were on various candidates, whom they were currently supporting, and why. They spoke passionately about how some of them were still “feeling the Bern” but weren’t sure how viable his candidacy would be the 2nd time around. Others noted how impressed they were with Harris’ progressive stance on a variety of issues but worried about her record with criminal justice reform. They spoke of their support for Warren, voices tinged with possibility as they exclaimed how exciting it would be to actually, finally, elect a woman to run this country. Then someone asked who was actually going to be able to vote in the upcoming election, and the air fell flat in our minivan; only 2 of the passengers were actually going to be old enough to vote by November 2020. But soon enough the energy picked up again as all they continued talking about their wishes and their desires and the ways in which they saw this election as being a particularly momentous time of their lives.

A few weeks ago, several months after that car-ride, we asked WUSYGers – members of the Winchester Unitarian Society Youth Group - what their thoughts were on voting and the upcoming election, in anticipation of the service that we would all be leading today. The teens thoughtfully, though somewhat dismally, went through a variety of problems plaguing the whole political system in our country. They cited the control of the government by corporate interests and bemoaned the persistent manipulation of political actors by corruption and desires for economic gain. As they did, I recalled witnessing several of our wide-eyed teens watching 13th together a couple of years ago as they first learned about ALEC – the American Legislative Exchange Council, an organization backed by corporations that has provided a variety of draft legislations to support the prison-industrial complex, among other nefarious schemes. ALEC has seemingly had control over the votes of a variety of so-called “representatives of the people” in the United States. This is just one of many disheartening stories we’ve all been privy to over the past few years about how power can be bought in this country, and how easily human lives can be disregarded for economic and political gain.

WUSYGers also touched on how broken the electoral process was, with extreme levels of partisan gerrymandering and ubiquitous forms of voter suppression spreading across the country. We also talked a bit about the relationship between voter suppression and race: according to the Brennan Center for Justice, 24 states have introduced restrictions

that “have made access to voting harder since 2010,” and their Director of the Democracy Program notes that there is a “clear correlation between states that have restricted voting and those with high African-American turnout in 2008... as well as those that recorded large increases in the Hispanic population in the 2010 census.” Likewise, WUSYGers brought up the question on the 2020 census about citizenship that clearly seems intended to hinder progressive political clout.

It was a sobering conversation. In addition to all of the above, they noted media and technology’s role in clouding the truth, making it really difficult to know who actually stands for what, and how hard it can be to endorse a candidate when it takes so much effort to sift through all of the misinformation out there about each one, on both sides of the political spectrum. As one teen began talking at length about all of these hindrances to our democracy, I couldn’t help but think that it really felt like the current race for the next president, and indeed most electoral races in this country, were rat races: never-ending parades of half-truths that ultimately would lead us right back to where we started. This feeling would make more sense to me if I had been speaking with members of older generations; folks jaded by the cyclical nature of a lifetime of gains and losses for various rights, coinciding with myriad seemingly endless wars at home and abroad. But young people shouldn’t be talking like this! What happened to their youthful idealism; their boldness and innate resistance to fear? Then Haley, the Assistant Director of WUSYG, asked the group who was planning to vote as soon as they were able to, and right away every single hand in the room went up.

Here’s the thing though, for all of us, no matter what year we were born: what happens inside the poll booths on November 3rd matters, a lot, but each of us has a role in the larger movement leading up to and after that election, too. And so do we, as a community, and especially as a progressive faith community, here at the Winchester Unitarian Society.

In the short term, one thing that all of us can do – as Unitarian Universalists AND their friends - is to help #UUtheVote! As Evan mentioned, the UU Association of Congregations recently launched a UU the Vote Campaign, and there are lots of ways for congregations to get involved while being mindful of the separation of church and state. In fact, I would argue that we are not acting with integrity as UUs – or as citizens in our democracy - if we do not get involved in any way. For those of you who don’t know, “affirming and promoting...the use of the democratic process...in society at large” is part of the 5th Principle of Unitarian Universalism, and as such, we are called to resist against electoral injustice in its plethora of present manifestations.

The reality is that UUs have been tangentially doing this work for a long time. As their Campaign launch website claims, “from expanding enfranchisement for women and black people to advocating for a path to citizenship for immigrants; from our history of civil rights engagement to taking on the ‘New Jim Crow,’ and white supremacy,” defending the right to vote has been a key component of our denominational work.

This time, however, we are being more explicit and intentional about it. And I for one think that that's pretty awesome. There are 3 key components of a UU Voting Campaign that congregations are specifically encouraged to consider:

1. Finding local partners to help coordinate voter registration drives.
2. Advocating for our UU values, supporting ballot initiatives aligned with our values, and encouraging civic engagement.
3. Getting out the vote in every way that we can!

Alright everyone, so now that we've heard about this, what are we all going to do in the next 10 months?

In the near and far future, it may also behoove all of us to recognize that this upcoming election is one of many upcoming elections, and our collective work toward liberation is ongoing.

It seems particularly appropriate today, a day after the beginning of the Lunar New Year – the year of the Rat – celebrated by Asians all around the world, to heed the wisdom of Grace Lee Boggs, Asian-American author, activist and feminist who writes: “transform yourself to transform the world.” To which I would add, transform yourself to transform your relationships, to transform your communities, to transform your country and thus the world.

It starts with each one of us, for, as Rev. Soto reminds us in the poem that Abby read earlier: we each have an immeasurable effect on the system, a fact that is constantly evidenced all around us in nature. Adrienne Maree Brown expands on this concept in her brilliant book “Emergent Strategy” first by looking at fractals in nature: “the micro reflects the macro and vice versa – Fibonacci patterns show up from space to cauliflower. The tiniest most mundane act reflects the biggest creations we can imagine.” As Unitarian Universalists, our 7th Principle calls us to affirm and promote “respect for the interdependent web of which we are a part,” which in turn calls us to recognize our part in that interdependent web; to notice these patterns in nature and our role within them.

Our role, in turn, transforms our relationships, our communities, and our community organizing. Incidentally, Maree Brown writes “I first became aware of fractals in 2004 when I was doing electoral organizing, though I didn't have the word for it. We were trying to impact the federal election...and what I saw clearly was that, at a local level, we – Americans – don't know how to do democracy... so many of our organizations working for social change are structured in ways that reflect the status quo.” She goes on to claim that, like fractals, “what we practice in the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system.”

When we see ourselves and our relationships as smaller, mirrored images, ever expanding unto our communities, our country and the world, how might we shift how we act to reflect the greater change we wish to see?

For Maree Brown, this meant beginning by looking at her own life: “In a fractal conception, I am a cell-sized unit of the human organism, and I have to use my life to leverage a shift in the system by *how* I am, as much as with the things I do. This means actually being in my life, and it means bringing my values into my daily decision making. Each day should be lived on purpose. This has meant increasing my intentionality about being with others. Adapting to the changes of life, yes, but with a clear and transparent intention to keep deepening with my loved ones and transforming together.”

I would challenge each one of us, especially over the course of the next several months, to consider looking at our own lives, and how we might live each day with purpose – minds set toward a collective greater goal.

One place that I would start with, especially at the advent of this Lunar New Year, is by reminding ourselves to take a step back sometimes, forget about the electoral rat race we all seem to be caught up in, and instead, focus on ourselves and how we can be inspired by rats themselves to effect greater change.

In doing my research for this sermon, I learned some really interesting facts about rats and ways that they are already directly being used by humans to better our planet. Did you know that giant African rats can be trained to sniff out landmines? Since 1997 an organization has used these “furry super-sniffers” to help clear over 1,300 mines from minefields in Tanzania, Mozambique and Angola, and more recently, they’ve been transported to Cambodia to continue doing this life-saving work. This same species of rats has also been used in Tanzania and other African countries as a more efficient and cost-effective way of sniffing out tuberculosis in children, again, directly saving lives. Who knew?! They’re kind of amazing, and often misunderstood, creatures!

But what I more so want to talk about today are the ways that rats – including the “regular” ones that we see around here (not literally, here, today, don’t worry! ...but the Boston-area!) – how these rats can model steps toward liberation for all of us.

1st, rats take care of themselves: despite our common associations with rats and diseases, they spend an inordinate amount of time each day cleaning themselves and otherwise taking steps to ensure that they are healthy and fully-functioning. Scientists from several articles I read noted that individual rats are, on the whole, much cleaner than both dogs and cats. One article even noted that much of the original basis for our preconceived terror related to rats and disease rests on a historical fallacy: citing gerbils, in fact, as more likely to have been the predominant carriers of the bubonic plague during the “black death” of the late middle ages.

2nd, rats take care of their communities. For example, rat mothers spend a particularly long time with their children, which gives them more time to teach them things and help them to adapt their behaviors to different environments. This helps to explain how some water rats in Australia have been studied by a group of scientists as “cutting cane toads open with surgical precision” to eat them while avoiding various poisonous parts. Cane toads are an invasive species with a few particularly venomous organs that have been

devastating a number of native animal populations in the region. The native water rats have been critical in restoring balance to the ecosystem through their ability to teach each other how to successfully prey on the poisonous toads.

3rd, rats embody resilience and what it means to survive and thrive as part of an interdependent system, a critical tool we will need to model in the coming generations as ocean levels, inequality and our population all continue to rise. They have an acute ability to figure out what they need to survive, and then they do the work to get it done, without hesitating. A WUSYG alum, many of you know her – Beatrice – was actually recently telling me about a book she read called “The 6th Extinction,” named so because our planet has already gone through 5 massive extinctions, which predicts rats outlasting humans and most other creatures and taking over the world after the next one.

So, overall, rats take the time to take care of themselves, they take care of each other, and they do the work to survive and thrive. Am I the only one who feels like we have a lot to learn from these creatures? And again, it all starts with each one of us. Just as the shapes in our fingerprints can be echoed in massive geological patterns seen from space, systemic change, transformative justice and liberation starts small, within each of us.

To demonstrate this fact, I would like to do one last thing before wrapping up this sermon. I want us all to play a game called “Justice Math” to see how a small number of us can quickly influence a much larger number.

This game takes place in turns.

Turn 1 – I point to and tag 2 people, let’s go with Tom and Rachel. When you are “tagged” please raise your hand and keep it raised.

Turn 2 – those 2 people tag 2 each, so, please each point to 2 more people, remembering that when you’re “tagged” you raise your hand and keep it raised. So 6 people total should be raising their hands.

Turn 3 – Those 4 who were just tagged, please turn and tag 2 more people. Now 14 people should be holding their hands up.

Turn 4 – those 8 who were just tagged, please tag 2 more people each. Now 30 people are holding up their hands. Also, at any time feel free to put your hand down or switch hands if it gets tired!

Turn 5 – those 16 who were tagged, please tag 2 more people. 62 folks are holding up their hands.

Turn 6 – those 32 people who were tagged, please each tag 2 more people. We should now have 126 folks with their hands in the air, is that everyone in the room or do we have more than 126 today? (*There were more than 126*) Ok, so in just 7 turns, we’ve already reached everyone in the room!

Now, how many turns do you think it would take to get all of Boston raising their hand? With a population of 685 thousand, it only takes 19 turns. All of Massachusetts? 22. To get all 327 million people in the United States, believe it or not, it only takes a little more than 28 turns! And the whole world, over 7 billion, in fewer than 33 turns. If we each took one turn a day, it would fewer than 5 weeks to get every single human on the planet to raise their hands.

Now, can you imagine, if instead of tagging 2 people, we shared an act of love, and they each just had to share it with 2 more people, and so on? Imagine if we created and shared an act of justice. How different would the world look in just 5 weeks? And it all started with just one person.

What's more, many of you already started a similar process today – by bringing a friend. What a beautiful blessing from the universe that our brilliant Membership Committee decided to make today the next Bring a Friend Sunday, long before our youth had chosen this topic, and even longer still before I had written this sermon. Bringing a friend is a beautiful example of just how something like that Justice Math activity can play out in the real world.

In fact, I know a lady from my home congregation who first checked out a UU church almost 30 years ago because one of her friends – incidentally from their local Democrats group – was pressured into bringing a friend to church for their Bring a Friend Sunday. She thought it was pretty neat, checked it out every once in a while, but really started attending regularly when her eldest son was in 8th grade so that he could do OWL (Our Whole Lives, sex and relationship education). She even decided to teach 5th grade RE that year, which she forced her younger son to attend. So, he had to go pretty much every week, even though, I'll tell you a secret, the best part of that experience for him was the vanilla crème-filled donuts the youth group always sold afterwards...

Many of you have probably figured out by now HOW I know that secret.

And yet, 24 years later, here I stand, no vanilla crème-filled donuts in sight, in my 10th year of UU Youth Ministry, having now worshipped with, learned alongside, gone on service trips all over the world, and so much more with over 2,000 UU youth by my rough estimations, all beginning with that 1 Bring a Friend Sunday when my Mom agreed to tag along.

And now, ending with me emboldened to be standing here today to tell all of you:

You have the power!

Go UU the vote!

Take care of and transform yourself, transform your relationships: tell your friends what you value, why, and what you should all be doing about it, and in doing so, transform your community, our community, our country and our world.