



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Forgotten History & the Origins of Our Discontents

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As you may have heard, Tuesday is Election Day. And as is traditional in many congregations on the Sunday before we enter the voting booth, we often pause to reflect on how our values can inform our engagement with the democratic process. This year admittedly is a little different since significant numbers of people have already voted. But given how divisive and polarizing this election season has been, it may still be useful to reflect briefly on how we can and can't show up politically as a congregation.

In general, if I could invite you to remember just four words as a quick reference for how to navigate the “separation of church and state,” it would be that religious communities are legally permitted to be **political, but not partisan**. If you think about how our religious forebears became involved with the abolitionist movement, the women's suffrage movement, the civil rights movement and more, it's clear that it is sometimes precisely our religious values that call us to political action.

Of course, as individuals, you can be as partisan as feels right to you. But *collectively*, as a congregation, there are limits to our political involvements. In particular, we cannot endorse partisan (i.e., party) candidates, nor political parties.

We can, however, work for and against particular political issues, positions, and pieces of legislation that are in—or out of—alignment with our UU values. And we can speak out prophetically to hold elected politicians accountable for specific actions they

have or haven't taken. (Full details available at <https://www.uua.org/justice-programs/realrules>.)

So what, some of you may be asking, are our UU values? One of our slogans is "Side with love." But what does it mean specifically to "[vote on the side of love](#)"? One of the most common ways of speaking about our shared UU values is in regard to our eight [UU Principles](#). So you might ask yourself:

1. Do this candidate's policy proposals, words, and behavior reflect support for the *inherent worth and dignity of every person*?
2. Does this candidate have a track record of practicing and legislating *justice, equity and compassion in human relations*?
3. Does this candidate encourage *acceptance of one another* across party lines?
4. Does this candidate model a *free and responsible search for truth and meaning*?
5. Does this candidate demonstrate a commitment to upholding the integrity of the *democratic process in our society*?
6. Will this candidate work toward *the goal of world community—with peace, liberty, and justice*, not merely for some, but *for all*?
7. Will this candidate take into account how decisions may impact our planet, and the lives of future generations—out of respect for the *interdependent web of all existence*.
8. Is this candidate committed to take actions *to accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions* as part of building a diverse, multicultural, beloved community?

These eight questions can help clarify which candidates are most likely to be aligned with your UU values; but ultimately, it is left to your individual conscience to discern which candidate is most aligned with *your own personal values*.

Along those lines, as we approach the deadline to cast a vote in this election, I would like to invite us to reflect some on how we reached this point in our nation's history, and where we might go from here. And as I was researching that question for this sermon, one of the books I kept hearing high praise for is *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson (1961-), which I would also highly recommend to you as a powerful and accessible read. Some of you may know her earlier award-winning

book published about a decade ago, titled *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which tells the story of the mass migration of African-Americans out of the American South during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Wilkinson was also the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in journalism. Her latest book *Caste* was selected as the most recent entry into Oprah's Book Club.

For now, I would like to highlight just a few points from *Caste* that might help inform and equip us as we are hopefully able to begin picking up the pieces on the other side of this election and start rebuilding together.

For many people, the past few years have been a wake up call that there are serious unresolved traumas in our country, and that ignoring them has not made them go away. Most recently, the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Walter Wallace Jr.—and far too many other people of color—have been devastating reminders that too often in this country, black lives have not mattered.

For members of this congregation who are black, indigenous, or people of color, this is not news. For others of us, it may be a matter of consciousness raising over time about the depth of ongoing racial injustice and our (conscious or unconscious) involvement in it. And as the late Maya Angelou used to say, **“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”**

Related to this maxim, Isabel Wilkerson's book *Caste* includes two particularly striking extended metaphors that have stuck with me with regard to working for racial justice. The first of these two metaphors is about our individual medical histories. I suspect the vast majority of you have filled out one—or likely many more than one—medical history while sitting in the waiting room of a doctor's office. That multi-page document asks not only about your personal past, but also about your parents, grandparents, and more.

Wilkerson writes:

The doctor will not hazard a diagnosis [without knowing] the history going back generations. Looking beneath the history of one's country is like learning that alcoholism or depression runs in one's family...or discovering that one has inherited the markers of a BRCA mutation for breast cancer. You don't ball up in a corner with guilt or shame at these

discoveries. You don't, if you are wise, forbid any mention of them. In fact, you do the opposite. You educate yourself. You talk to people who have been through it and to specialists who have researched it. You learn the consequences and obstacles, the options and treatment.... Then you take precautions and work to ensure that these things, whatever they are, don't happen again. (Wilkerson 13-14)

I find this metaphor comparing our country's racist history to our personal medical histories really helpful. We don't need to feel guilt or shame about our country being diagnosed with racism, but we do need to educate ourselves and commit ourselves to dismantling our nation's deeply-entrenched systems of white supremacy to create a more fair and free future for all people, regardless of skin color.

The other metaphor Wilkerson uses in *Caste* that I found particularly insightful is that being a citizen of the United States is like inheriting an old house. No one alive today built this house, but as with any old house that one might inherit, **"Any further deterioration is in our hands"** (Wilkerson 15-16). It may not be our fault, but it is our responsibility.

How long does that responsibility last? As just one among many possible points of reference, I'll give you a final interesting point from *Caste*; consider that 246 years passed from 1619 (when the first enslaved Africans were brought to the colony of Virginia), until 1865, when the U.S. Civil War over slavery ended. If you add those 246 years of enslavement to 1865, you'll find that, **"No current-day adult will be alive in the year in which African-Americans as a group will have been free for as long as they had been enslaved. That will not come until 2111,"** ninety-one years from now (Wilkerson 47-48). Much work remains to be done to reach Collective Liberation—when we all get free.

In that spirit, in a few moments we'll sing together the hymn "Fire of Commitment." As we do so, I invite us each to continue reflecting on the tragic history we have inherited, and how we feel called (both individually and collectively) to rebuild together in the days to come.

For now, as we reflect on how to continue responding in the days and weeks to come to the pivotal historical moment in which we find ourselves, I'll leave you with a quote from James Baldwin's (1924-1987) final novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979):

When the dream was slaughtered and all that love and labor seemed to have come to nothing, we scattered.... We knew where we had been, what we had tried to do, who had cracked, gone mad, died, or been murdered around us.

Not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost, it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again. (Glaude xxix)