Democracy; Through My Eyes

 Anthony Mtuaswa Johnson

Good Morning and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix.

I welcome you in the name of the Ancestors, on whose shoulders I stand,

and I welcome you in the name of all that you hold sacred.

It is indeed an honor and a pleasure to be able to share this space with you on this

beautiful morning. My personal appreciation for the principles of Unitarian Universalism

are best summed up in the welcoming words adapted from the Unitarian Church of

Dublin, Ireland, and I quote:

“we do not ask what you believe, or expect you to think the way we do, but only that you

try to live a kindly, helpful life, with the dignity proper to a human being. Welcome, all

who believe that religion is wider than any sect and deeper than any set of

opinions. Welcome all who might find in our friendship, strength and encouragement for

daily living.”

Today’s Sermon is entitled

“Democracy, Through My Eyes.”

As I continue to learn to listen with my eyes.

They say to make a good omelet you have to break a few eggs. This morning I plan to do

just that and to honor our 6th principle:

“the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations

and in the society at large”

Speaking of the society at large…when I first heard, years ago, that the word democracy

was nowhere in our Constitution or in the Declaration of Independence, I was startled.

Surely, this was not true. Our government is a democracy!

But true it is. As it turns out, our founders actually feared democratic rule. Our founders

preferred the word “republic.”

In the late 18th century, rule by the people was thought to lead to disorder and disruption.

And at the same time, a democratically-based government was seen as superior to the

monarchies of Europe.

None other than James Madison, the father of the constitution and the 4th president of

the United States and author of the Bill of Rights expressed this attitude in federalist

paper number Ten, I quote: “instability, injustice, and confusion have in truth been the

mortal disease under which popular governments everywhere perished.”

Of course, we all know that democracies did not originate with the founding of the

United States. The term "democracy" comes from two Greek words: "demos" (the people)

and "kratia" (power or authority). The Greeks are famous for practicing direct

democracy, a system in which citizens (men) would meet to discuss all policy, and then

make decisions by majority rule. What many may not know is that this direct democracy,

practiced by the Greeks, is called “sortition.”

Our American founders built an "in direct" or "representative" democracy, influenced by

the Indigenous Iroquois people. Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1751 that:

“it would be a strange thing if six nations of ignorant savages should be capable of

forming a scheme for such a union and be able to execute it in such a manner as that

it has subsisted ages and appears indissoluble; and yet that a like union should be

impractical for ten or a dozen English colonies.”

Let us also give recognition to many other indigenous societies around the world

who have been also practicing democracy. They have been gathering in villages and under

baobab, aka, “discussion” trees since time immemorial. One example comes to mind. Not

only did ancient African societies have a democratic structure, they also recognized major

sets of human rights and civil liberties. The Kurukan Fuga charter (1236) also known as

the Manden charter, was the constitution of the great Mali empire.

Since it is older than the “bill of rights (1689), the declaration of right of man and of the

citizen (1789) and almost the Magna Carta (1215-1297), it is considered by some to

be the first declaration of human rights in history. In 2009 UNESCO included it in their

representative lists of, quote “the intangible cultural heritage of humanity.”

Now, our founders preferred the term” republic” to "democracy" because it described a

system they generally preferred, in that the interests of the people were represented by

more knowledgeable and wealthier, white men. These were the only citizens who were

responsible to those that elected them. Today, we tend to use the terms "republic"

and "democracy" as if they are one and the same; they are not. Democracy for me,

through my eyes, remains a dream deferred. Our dream has turned into a nightmare

and is exploding before our very eyes. Our politics is broken, and I believe it can be fixed.

But only if a few eggs are broken. We need a new omelet.

A real democracy is not only possible — it is an urgent necessity. We must think and act

out of the box, even at the risk of breaking a few eggs, even if, they are organic.

Our government is controlled by monied interest and leaders who seem to be held in

place by the plaster and mortar of incumbency. I believe that we can fix democracy by

eliminating politicians and replacing them with a representative network of everyday

citizens, yes, ordinary people.

It is an understatement to say this would represent a radical break with our existing

representative democracy. Yet, in an interesting historical twist, random selection,

sortition, was precisely how the ancient Greek democracies populated their legislation-

drafting bodies, their courts and most of their bureaucracies.

This is what the Greeks did. We could attenuate the democratic style of Athens, of

sortition. Updating it for a world where slavery is outlawed and gender equality is

paramount, and harnessing the deliberative skills, capacities and network technologies of

the modern era.

This, then, will be democracy 2.0. Here we go!!

Adding a little ordinary people spice to our democratic omelet.

The exact ingredients to be worked out and like any good cook---tasting as we go.

The future of democracy has arrived. It is time for the end of politicians.

Sortition, the random selection of ordinary people to govern themselves.

I believe that the history of democracy is still being made. The most common criticism of

sortition, the random selection of legislators, is that it would not filter-out ill-equipped

candidates in the way elections supposedly do. How’s that working for us?

That the vast majority of folks just don’t have the bandwidth-the skills or intelligence to

comprehend and amend laws. Or that locally it might not work, or it is too expensive, or

that it would take too much time or that we all know that people do not want to be

involved in lawmaking. There is a wealth of recent evidence that has shown that groups of

randomly selected, ordinary people can and do make balanced, informed and trusted

decisions. Think jury selection! These citizens' assemblies are legitimate, accountable,

competent and, above all, convincing demonstrations that we can govern ourselves. Just

imagine, no more need to please financial donors. No need to keep our eyes on polls or

approval ratings. No more lobbying and no more hunting for the perfect media

soundbite.

The rest of the system could initially remain untouched: the new representatives would

continue to come from every corner of the country to travel to the capital to introduce,

deliberate, develop and vote on legislation. They would still have staff to organize

engagements with their geographical constituents, and explain and justify their

motivations and reasoning to the media. There would still be lawyers employed to flesh

out the precise details of the laws, under the government’s direction. With one small

difference-now they work for us! No doubt the full array of lobbyists and civil society

groups would continue to try to attract the representatives’ attention and push pet

issues up the political agenda, or keep some of them off the agenda altogether.

The media would still hound the representatives and demand justifications

for decisions. However, powerful vested interests could not threaten to withdraw

financial support, or run damaging pre-election media campaigns if they were

ignored. My underlying assumption, which I believe resonates with many UU’s, is that of

reaching conclusions through reason rather than through force and or coercion. Through

moral reasoning rather than back-room deal making or self-interested bargaining.

To honor our 6th principle: “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process

within our congregations and in the society at large”

With sortition we just might even begin to see something of ourselves, people who look

like us, people who think like us, people who feel like us, persons who have had

experiences like us, in the making and changing the law. And maybe, just maybe, we

might not despise them as much.

James Baldwin reminds us: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but

nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

Amen…Blessed be…Ashe’