

Heart of Democracy
Rev. Amy Bowden Freedman
Channing Memorial Church
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“We have been born into a moment of unprecedented danger and opportunity.”¹
This opening line from this morning’s reading speaks to us about our times. Truly, this moment contains unique challenges unlike those faced by past generations. Just as we face certain dangers, we also have a unique opportunity “to span the distance between our present situation and our vision of a better world.”

Here in Newport, on this soil, we are blessed by the footsteps of many visionaries and reformers whose lives enrich our own. They had the courage to confront the dangers of their times. They had the moral strength to resist the powers and structures of their day that they believed to be unjust. They had the vision and the tenacity to be able to foresee and to help create a better way of life.

Rhode Island and specifically our city of Newport had a unique role in the shaping of our nation. Truly, it is awe-inspiring to consider the people and events that took place here and the significant impact on our nation and world.

One of the names being proposed for the new Sakonnet River Bridge is Anne Hutchinson. Like many early settlers, she moved to Massachusetts Bay Colony seeking to worship freely. Anne had no formal education but was instructed by her father who was a dissident Puritan clergyman. Anne and her husband William had eleven children when they arrived in the New World in 1634 and their family eventually grew to fifteen. Anne invited other women to her home where they studied the Bible, discussed religious issues, and current events. These gatherings were so engaging that soon men as well as women filled her home to participate in lively discussions. Her following grew to eighty people, too large a gathering for a house so they moved to a church.

Although the early settlers of Massachusetts Bay Colony left England in order to worship freely, they themselves did not believe in the free expression of religion. The Puritans set up a theocracy where all people were expected to follow the same religious laws. Anne Hutchinson directly challenged the moral and legal codes of the Puritans as well as advocating for the rights of women and Native Americans. Like Rogers Williams, she was put on trial for her heretical views and banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1638, Anne Hutchinson, her family, and sixty of her followers settled in Pocasset, what we now call Portsmouth, Rhode Island.

At a time when women were told to be quiet and obedient, Anne Hutchinson spoke out and defied the established order. At a time when it was taught that women were cursed, Anne held a steadfast belief that to be a woman was a blessing. Certainly, she had plenty of reasons to be complacent including the moral codes of the time and her massive responsibilities as the mother of such a large family. There was no model for her

¹ Excerpts from *Common Sense*, Paul Williams

actions. However, she was moved by her own conscience, the teachings of her father, and her reading of the Bible which gave her a vision of a more harmonious world. She started small, inviting neighboring women to join her for conversation—a small group ministry, if you will. However, the truth of her message and the energy that resulted could not be contained. In just four years from when she arrived in Massachusetts Bay Colony, her following grew enough to be perceived as a threat to the establishment.

In 1639, a year after Hutchinson's group established Pocasset on the northern end of Aquidneck Island, half of the group led by William Coddington and Nicholas Easton moved south to form our city of Newport. Following their conscience, many of them became Baptists believing in the separation of church and state. This was codified into law in the Newport Town Statutes of 1641. Do you know what this means? Newport, this city, where we are gathered for worship today is one of the first secular democracies.

During the recent Winter Festival, I had a tour of the Old Colony House given by Jamie Carlson, a member of our church. She pointed out something that I had never considered before. The center of town, what we now call Washington Square, was designed as an expression of Newport's secular foundations. Newport began sort of like Boston a haphazard network of streets mostly formed by cow paths. The Colony House was built in 1736 to make the Parade (what we now call Washington Square) a more grand public space. Unlike Massachusetts where the First Parish or established Puritan church is on the top of the public square, here in Newport, the seat of government was on one end and the Brick Marketplace representing commerce was on the other. There are no churches in the center of town. The houses of worship are all on side streets thereby demonstrating the freedom of all people to express themselves and to worship without interference.

We are in the Heart of Democracy. The Colony House served as the primary state house for Rhode Island from 1739-1901. The General Assembly met here in Newport. George Washington and French Count Rochambeau met on these shores to coordinate their battle plan to overthrow the British. William Ellery maternal grandfather of our own William Ellery Channing, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence which was read from the balcony of the Colony House.

What's even more remarkable is that through out the 19th Century, people from all over the state of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations would come to this town for 'Lecture Day. Each May, visitors were drawn to Newport for the festivities which included announcement of the election results, inauguration of officials, celebrations, political negotiations, and party conflicts. According to scholars, 'Lecture Day was considered a more important holiday than Christmas.

Now, I try to imagine our town bustling with the same sort of excitement as yesterday's Saint Patrick's Day Parade. Only instead of as a tribute to a Catholic Saint or an excuse to drink beer, everyone is electrified by the democratic process.

The closest I can come to this sort of enthusiasm is the recent Inauguration of Barack Obama as our 44th President. Folks swarmed to Washington DC even if they did not have a ticket to any of the special events. Some of my colleagues went to Washington because they wanted to be a part of history. They told me, "I want to be as close as possible to that moment. I want my children to know I was a part of that day."

Personally, when I woke up on Inauguration Day, I felt like the popular song by Will I. aM. "It's a new day!" As I watched on TV with my mother, husband, and baby daughter, my heart flooded with a sense of promise and renewed hope. Even folks who did not vote for Obama were moved by the milestone of our first black President and the excitement of more people engaged with American politics. 1.8 million people gathered, a record-breaking event in the nation's capital. Truly, a renewed spirit of cooperation and possibility as people of all races celebrated together.

So now what? Sometimes it feels like our nation is suffering from a hangover. Like the Inauguration was a drunken fling. We are experiencing the brutal reality that change does not happen overnight. Our heads are throbbing with the glaring fact of an economic recession. Global peace seemed within reach but now the path toward resolution appears long and difficult. Our lives are filled with the challenges of making ends meet, caring for our families, struggling to maintain our own health while the health of our planet home and dwindling resources is like a dark cloud we can ignore but never forget entirely.

Returning to our reading from Paul Winters:

O friends
don't forget
why we're here!

The truth is, we have the skills
and we have the courage
if we could only keep our minds
on what we really want.

What we really want is for the well-being of our families, neighbors, and planet. The call of the ancient Hebrew prophet Isaiah shakes us from our petty concerns to remind us of the calling of our faith to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to comfort all who mourn, to build up ancient ruins.

Many times, we become discouraged with the complexity and scale of the problems of our times. There are so many needs, so much that is broken and needs fixing. The powers of government seem too entrenched with the interests of big business to really care about our well-being and that of the down-trodden. Now that Obama is in the White House, I have heard people complain that he has not brought about any change instead bringing in the same players who have no stake in the lives of average citizens.

Anne Hutchinson did not complain that she was born into the “doomed generation” or find excuses for inaction. She lived out her beliefs. We must do the same. Living in a small state as we do, we have an opportunity to effect legislation and bring about positive change.

I invite you to participate in Legislative Ministry. This group of Unitarian Universalists is seeking to influence our state of Rhode Island. How? By joining together to advocate on 3 or 4 issues per Legislative session. This afternoon, there is an Annual Meeting at the First Unitarian Church in Providence where members from all five Unitarian Universalist congregations will vote on which issues to focus on this year. If you would like to go to the meeting, please speak to me or Beth following the service. If you are unable to attend this afternoon, sign up with Betsy Dees in the Parish Hall and we will keep you informed.

There will be simple actions that you can fit into your busy life that will make a difference from sending postcards to contacting your state senator or representative. We may organize house parties to bring people together around important initiatives.

One of the blessings of our country is that we are free to express our opinions and to advocate for change. Our state senators and representatives work for us. Whenever constituents take the time to communicate our message is taken seriously.

The heart of democracy is the dedication of its citizens to engage in the issues of our times. Just like the visionaries and leaders who walked these streets before us, although the outcome may not be clear from where we stand, a few people can build a bridge to a better world.

How to prevent world catastrophe:

- 1) Admit that it could happen.
- 2) Decide that it will not happen.
- 3) Commit your vision and energy to number two

without ever forgetting number one.

To choose to build a bridge

is the essential act of love.