

## **“Community Matters”**

In his State of the Union Address on January 6, 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered a speech designed to rally Americans in defense of liberty, which was desperately threatened at that time. The country had barely emerged from a Great Depression that left millions unemployed. Factories were idle, banks closed, farms abandoned. Across the seas, the Nazis had invaded Czechoslovakia and Poland and then occupied France. Japan had overrun Manchuria and China. Bullies and dictators were preaching world domination, and in this climate of uncertainty and fear, the President sought to remind his countrymen and women of the fundamental truths on which America had been founded—truths which would have to become more widespread and eventually universal if the world were to have a future beyond the prospect of chaos and war.

It became known as the Four Freedoms speech, for in it, Roosevelt asserted that *“in the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.*

*The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world.*

*The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his or her own way everywhere in the world.*

*The third is freedom from want, which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world*

*The fourth is freedom from fear, which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.*

*This is no vision of a distant millennium,”* Roosevelt told his listeners. *“It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation. That kind of world is the very antithesis of the so-called ‘new order’ or tyranny which the dictators seek to create ....”,* a world based on human rights and respect for the individual within an international framework of cooperation and peace.

Much has changed in the intervening sixty-six years. A whole lifetime has gone by. And yet much remains the same. Genocide and ethnic cleansing persist in a world aflame with the antipathy of ancient tribalisms. Billions live in poverty, barely subsisting despite the promises of global trade and an information economy. Democratic freedoms that seemed ascendant with the fall of the Soviet Union are again at risk in Russia, while an obsession with national security chips away at hard won liberties here at home.

In these anxious times, when the country seems to have lost its way and the world

seems sliding toward an apocalyptic future egged on by fanatics and fundamentalists of every stripe, it seems worth pondering again the four freedoms and what they mean to us in our own day.

The Freedoms that Roosevelt enunciated in 1941 were turned into a living image two years later when the illustrator Norman Rockwell made them into a series of iconic paintings, putting flesh and blood on the President's rhetoric to depict what these values meant in the lives of ordinary Americans. Call the paintings corny if you like. But after they appeared in the Saturday Evening Post, Rockwell's Four Freedoms were put to work selling war bonds, raising over \$130,000,000 to fight the Axis and substantially contributing to victory over the fascists in World War Two. The artist later said the works were among the most difficult he ever executed, "serious paintings which sucked the energy right out of me, leaving me dazed and thoroughly weary." You all know these artworks. As much as Gilbert Stuart's portraits of Washington or Matthew Brady's photos of Lincoln, they are part of the visual landscape of our history.

The first is Freedom of Speech. A man lifts his voice at town meeting. From his complexion and weathered hands, he probably labors outdoors for a living. Two men nearby in jackets and ties are seated, looking up toward the speaker whose blue plaid work shirt is open at the collar. The speaker appears confident, thoughtful, obviously respected by his better dressed neighbors, who pay more heed to the man's words than the cut of his garments.

The second is Freedom of Worship. The canvass is filled with women's and men's faces, bathed in a soft light, hands clutched or gently folded in prayer, one holding a rosary, people of all races and all bearing the unmistakable cares and burdens of humanity in their eyes which seemed focused on some invisible presence, far beyond the frame of the picture. Across the top of the painting are the words of James Madison, father of the U.S. Constitution, "according to the dictates of conscience."

Freedom from Fear, the third painting: Two young children are being tucked into bed by their mother, bending downward with infinite tenderness, as father stands by her side gazing at the sleeping pair, weary but still paternally proud and protective, holding in his left hand a folded newspaper whose headline is only partially visible, "Bombings Kill."

Freedom from Want: The viewer seems to be invited into the final picture in the series, to become a guest at a traditional Thanksgiving Dinner, sharing the abundance of one family's celebration of this most typical of American holidays.

It was only a few years after that very first Thanksgiving, in 1629, just nine years after the Pilgrims had landed at Plymouth, that Massachusetts held its first town meeting, that most typical instance of American democracy in action. Thomas Jefferson called town meeting "the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government," and more recently, when Alexander Solzhenitsyn returned to his native land after spending eighteen years in rural Vermont, he said "I have observed here in Cavendish, and in the surrounding towns the sensible and sure process of

grassroots democracy,” so different than the gulags he’d left in exile.

The ethos of self-government emerged from New England congregations like this one, which governed their church business by direct vote of the members and ordered public affairs the same way. Burlington held its first meeting of proprietors, as they were then called, in 1774, electing Thomas Chittenden moderator with Ira Allen clerk and giving Ira and his brother Ethan along with other members of the Onion River Company authority to survey and lay out a township in the Champlain Valley. There were just a few residents at first. So it wasn’t until thirty-one years later, at another meeting warned for the purpose, that twenty-five of the voters “formed themselves into a body by a unanimous vote, by the name of the First Society for Social and Public Worship in the Town of Burlington,” the direct antecedent of the annual meeting that we hold later this morning. Our congregational meeting is born of the same impulse as town meetings all over Vermont which recently mixed calls for impeaching the president with more routine matters of plowing the roads and paying for the schools, an impulse that puts ordinary people in charge of their lives in matters large and small, sacred and profane. And if you think that this yearly ritual of electing officers and passing a budget is unimportant, or doesn’t concern you, or ranks low in the scale of priorities, then you must think that democracy itself doesn’t concern you. Because what we do here in this religious Society is democracy, in its purest and most radical form.

I’ve often said that Unitarian Universalist is nothing more or less than the democratic method applied to religion, the form of faith that James Madison had in mind when he wrote the First Amendment and made sure that it led the other nine. “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” Madison wrote, just as he’d written a dozen years earlier when drafting Virginia’s new state constitution in the revolutionary fire of 1776 “that religion, or the duty which we owe our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force and violence; and therefore, all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience.” Separation of church and state, with a guarantee of private judgement in matters pertaining to the infinite and imponderable—this became the holy charter on which our land was founded

And If America has been able to avoid the kind of sectarian strife that pits Sunni against Shia, Arab against Jew, elsewhere in the world, if America is not only the intensely religious but also the most religiously diverse nation on the planet, where people of divergent opinions can to some degree live amicably side by side, it’s thanks to the principles we not only preach but try to live by here, of social and religious tolerance and respect for cultural diversity.

The Four Freedoms, at least as delineated by Franklin Roosevelt and depicted by Norman Rockwell, are close to being the touchstones of our spiritual tradition. Freedom from Fear—a renunciation of force as the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong. Freedom from Want—envisioning a world where everyone has a seat at the table. Along with Freedom to Worship and Freedom of Speech, all are social forms of being,

interconnected expressions of our humanity. For there is no Thanksgiving meal without the family there to share the bounty. There is no Freedom to Speak apart from a responsibility to join with others in conversation and debate about matters of mutual interest. And perhaps hardest for Unitarian Universalists to admit or understand, there is no Freedom of Worship apart from the demands and disciplines of congregational life. For just as the U.S. Constitution begins its preamble with that resounding phrase “We the People,” ours is a covenantal theology which begins with people, voluntarily assembled to support each other in living out their values and to hold each other accountable in reaching for their ideals. Like self-government, liberal religion is a social discipline. Unitarian Universalism and the freedom we prize don’t exist except in the context of community and in the arts of cooperative living.

The world has changed dramatically since 1941, and yet much remains the same. America has almost forgotten the Great Depression and has become the richest nation of all time, with a gross domestic product of over thirteen trillion dollars, yet remains in danger of moral bankruptcy as the poor and middle class are left behind by a culture of unlimited personal greed and unbridled corporate gain. America is no longer threatened by armies or invasions from abroad, having achieved military supremacy over all rivals and a redundant power to obliterate the earth many times over, yet by the very hubris and arrogance of that power has created untold enemies across the earth where it once claimed allies and friends.

The road ahead is difficult. The country at times seems to have lost the compass that guided figures like Roosevelt and Rockwell through times of national trial. But for that very reason, I still believe that what we do here matters. Community matters. Congregations matter. People assembled to discuss the issues of the day, to pool their resources for the common good and to vote on how their money gets spent, to elect their own town moderators and church boards, to form the intermediary institutions of civil society, between the isolated individual and the overarching power of the state, to exercise the faculty of dissent, to learn how to disagree with their neighbors without attacking them, to build a culture of transparency where meetings are open and records are available for public inspection, to engage in parliamentary process—all of this matters enormously if the Four Freedoms are to be kept alive.

Even a small group of citizens with a moral vision can make a difference in a state like ours. And even a small state like Vermont can make a difference in the larger world. This is our democratic heritage. And this is our faith’s promise to the future.

