

“Whose Representatives?”
a sermon preached by Rev. David Carl Olson
to the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore
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William Greider, in *Who Will Tell the People: the betrayal of American democracy*, writes, “Citizens are cut out of the politics surrounding the most important governing questions. The representative system has undergone grotesque distortion of its original purpose. The connective tissues that in different ways once linked ordinary people to governing—political parties, the media, the secondary mediating institutions—no longer function reliably. At the highest levels of government, the power to decide things has instead gravitated from the many to the few.” (11-12)

We met with this man of legend in the first half of the morning, one Tuesday. This was a good thing. He tended to be more tired later in the day, and sometimes snoozed during meetings late in the week and late in the day. But for us, a half dozen clergy leaders come to City Hall, he was awake and cheerful.

It was always a little funny the way he presented himself. He had a retinue of advance people and a crowd of experts at every public gathering I ever saw. An aide would welcome us to City Hall, assure us that the Mayor was looking forward to our time. Another would walk with us into the conference room and then stand with his hands over the back of the chair at the head of the table. That seat, clearly, was reserved not for the citizenry, but for “The Don.”

“The Don” is what we called him, not with much respect. “Mr. Mayor” is what he would have preferred. And soon, a few minutes late so that all would be present and he could make an entrance, the door to his suite would be opened, and Don Williamson, Mayor of the City of Flint, would waddle in and start shaking hands.

The first time the leadership of Flint Area Congregations Together—FACT—met with the Mayor, he told us his story and tried to elicit ours. He grew up in a Methodist family, you see, and he understood how churches run. He spoke about singing in the choir, and his mother teaching Sunday school, and he watched and waited for us to reveal ourselves.

We did, of course, but not in the ways he imagined. We wanted to talk about a vision for the city, we wanted to share our interest in being part of the solution to the problems of unemployment and crime and—heaven forbid—the profound lack of hope in that desolated city. He wondered if we wanted a favor, if we wanted the streets in front of our churches paved or a more visible police force in our parking lots. And he wanted to know how many people were in our congregations and, more importantly, how many votes. How many votes.

He was our representative in the Mayor's Office, and we wanted vision from him. He was willing to take the power we gave him, and was willing to negotiate just a little kickback.

It was funny when we took ward and precinct organizing seriously. In Roxbury, Massachusetts, Senator Dianne Wilkerson was a person with quite a bit of clout. She chaired the Ways and Means Committee, and with that came a larger staff. She had a larger office than any almost any other state senator. And when we in the process of collecting 100,000 signatures calling for new investments in affordable housing, she lambasted us. Not a bad idea, she told us, but absolutely at the wrong time. The budget was already written, and there simply was no room for money for affordable housing. Maybe if we showed up at her hearings at the right time, there might have been a possibility of our helping to shape the budget . . .

We were undeterred. We insisted that the problem was not going to go away, and that since the level of funding for affordable housing was 50 per cent less than it had been a decade before—and the overall state budget was nearly three times the size it had been in the previous decade—we were sure that there had to be money somewhere. The state just needed some new priorities.

And so we held a series of hearings in churches throughout the city. We showed our state representatives and state senators the 8,000 signatures we collected in their neighborhood. A working-two-jobs dad gave testimony about his family that was about to be homeless because of rents that are too high and no place cheaper to move. The Catholic Sisters Collaborative showed the 12,000 signatures they had collected in another neighborhood, and spoke about the numbers of students who were tripling up and quadrupling up and changing both the culture of neighborhoods and the prices landlords could demand. A Haitian mother and volunteer showed the 17,000 signatures her parish had been able to collect on the subway as it passed through their neighborhood, and could name the names of dozens of friends who had to leave the city because there just wasn't any affordable housing.

The Chair of the Ways and Means Committee lambasted us: bad timing, impossible ideas, emotional and unscientific testimony, no overwhelming public sentiment. But we finally held a public meeting, and overflowed a gymnasium with 3,500 people. We wheeled a wheelbarrow in with not the 100,000 signatures we had challenged ourselves with (and which we privately thought we would never achieve and thus would have to somehow explain). No, not 100,000 signatures. 128,000 signatures, with several boxes back in the office which we hadn't yet tabulated.

And while the Chair of Senate Ways and Means boycotted our action in her very district, the President of the State Senate showed up and announced his commitment to something new, the creation of a \$100 million trust fund for affordable housing, funded at \$20 million a year for at least five years.

Now the solution, the T-shirt tells me, is that the people need to get their act together, the citizens need to show the politicians who is in charge. You know the cartoon, a looming shark in the waters; then the school of smaller fish organizes itself into a larger, predatory force to swallow the shark. Organize! It tells us. The bumper sticker on my old beat up clunker used to read “If the people will lead, the leaders will follow.” An organized citizenry is just what our society needs, just what our representatives need, just what we need, right?

But we organize today in a changing culture. The post- World War II era was a time with a social culture that had great coherence. We felt as a nation that we were going forward in a single direction. It had been true in our efforts to overcome the Depression and was certainly true in our at our entrance into the World War. Now a national highway grid was being laid out, suburbs were expanding, GIs by the millions were going to college, American international influence was never greater, our manufacturing base was providing the world with all the modern conveniences, and everyone knew that they could own a home with car, (or two), with a new washer and dryer, with a television set in every room, and all of us, of course, were going to church on Sundays.

This time of national convergence was not without its problems. Racism was exposed in the selective nature of the suburban move—who got the mortgages, and who did not? The interests of manufacturers was displayed in the profound disruption of stable city life by the bulldozing of viable urban neighborhoods in the rush to build highways of inner belts and outer belts and prime spurs and secondary feeders to get out to those suburbs growing in power and significance. In some places, including here in Baltimore, people were able to stop the destruction for the sake of highways to protect their neighborhoods, new dynamics were established and new politicians were able to launch careers.

The period of convergence and coherence included mediating secondary institutions, like the trade union movement, largely, which cooperated with rather than confronted the manufacturing sector; this created a broad social understanding that we were all in this together, that labor and management had particular roles to play, but that mutual progress was what we were all about. (That this was the rhetoric is not my acceptance of its theses, but it is the general pattern of the “we’re going forward together” attitude that had been developing since the days of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.)

And the media, itself, was both an obscurer and an illuminator of social reality. Those televisions in every room portrayed the ways we ought to be—in sitcoms, surely, but mostly in commercials—but those same TVs brought us the nightly news that reported on the civil rights movement, on the Soviet threat, on the war against Vietnam.

A time of convergence, coherence, when every high school civics class taught us about the smooth workings of our representative democracy. And we were taught to trust those workings, to have confidence in the government that we had established.

It was only a brief meeting on New Year's Eve. I was preparing to lead the litany for the city at St. Ignatius Church on North Calvert Street just a few blocks from here. I shook hands with a few Protestant, Jewish and Catholic clergy, and was pleased to meet Governor O'Malley, whose prayer would conclude the litany. But it was when I met Mayor Sheila Dixon that I heard the notice that her office, at least, makes of our congregation. "Oh yes," she said, and she began to name parishioners of this congregation. I shared with her the fact that I would always be her constituent, seeing that there is a residency requirement in the letter of call you extended to me. "That's unusual," she said, "most of the ministers I know don't live in the city." I told her that this church had a commitment to the city, and a commitment to having its minister be involved in civic life. She smiled.

Her faith-based organizations assistant came forward and shook my hand. "Rev. Olson, we're so happy you're here in Baltimore. I understand that you've already been shown around town and you've signed on to the Clergy's Agenda for Baltimore prepared by BUILD." Well, of course, I have been shown around Baltimore, by many of you, certainly, but also by David Casey, the Executive Director of Baltimore Regional Initiative Developing Genuine Equality (BRIDGE), and Arnie Graf, former organizer of Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD). And I indicated to the clergy caucus at BRIDGE that our congregation wants to find concrete ways to make a difference in Maryland; told the clergy caucus of BUILD that I surely see their initiatives at job-creation and housing guarantees for working people and better schools and transportation for everyone as essential for the kind of city I want to live in, the kind of civic life that Unitarian Universalists have long considered essential.

Even as we shook hands in that impressive Catholic setting, it was clear that the old ways of thinking from that time of convergence were insufficient for the political mood of today. We don't live in a time of convergence; we live in an increasingly diverse culture that is not sure at all that we're all in this together, not sure that we're moving forward together. Since a president fired the air traffic controllers and destroyed their union PATCO, the struggle between unions and the captains of industry has been sharp, and the social mediating role of unions has been transformed so that the broader movement of working people is not transparently led by the unions. The media, as it has been transformed by 24 hours a day news and, especially, as more and more media outlets are under the control of fewer and fewer hands, there is no sense that there is an objective story to be told, but rather there are extreme positions to be taken and defended. The old understandings of the time of convergence are uprooted by the divergence of mediating social structures and the media itself.

In that impressive Catholic hall, we played out an antique ritual, including Catholics and Protestants and Jews—and with the addition of a muezzin’s call to prayer, just a couple of Muslims—as if there really were a convergent civic religion which brought the whole community together. The form of our evening was clearly of another time; there was nothing that might have reflected the culture of an Asian Buddhist or any of the myriad practices of Hindus, nothing Zoroastrian or Shinto, nothing that felt the least bit Latin American or African; we were practicing a convergent religion in a divergent time.

Why are things different? Certainly the material base of our communities has changed. We are not the blue collar manufacturing town of a former day. Political and economic power has moved out of the city and moved to county and regional settings, even to national and transnational realities. And, as I’ve mentioned, the media has changed, the secondary mediating structures have changed . . .

But people also have learned to distrust politicians, to expect that our representatives will not represent us. A senator lies to us about his personal life, and we wonder if he’s lied about other things. A governor tries to sell a Senate seat, and we wonder where else he’s been “on the take.” A mayor loses her position over a series of stupid decisions that violate the public trust . . .

Democracy is in trouble in this country. The health insurance reform process illustrates this to us. Forces opposed to any change in the status quo imagine that they can successfully stop the movement toward resolution of the crisis if they put up procedural obstacles and preach fear long enough—and they may be right! The will of the people for reform now gets sidetracked in the reality of economic crisis and false accusations of socialism. And representative democracy does not represent the people.

There are things we need to pay attention to. The Maryland General Assembly will be meeting in a few weeks, and it is important that our representatives know not only that we have some opinions about our politics, but that we are willing to take action to see that our interests are represented in Annapolis. This church, I am proud to say, has always been one of the most stalwart participants in Equality Maryland’s Lobby Day for civil marriage, and I hope that will continue. I’m sure the Social Action Clearinghouse table in the Parish Hall and our Happenings e-mail update will keep us informed.

We seek with our co-religionists to be represented in Annapolis as part of something larger than ourselves. And so the UU Legislative Ministry of Maryland brings together congregational leaders from throughout the state to raise a voice for our perspective in the public arena. Their annual meeting happens on January 23rd in Annapolis, and I know Paul Sturm is organizing a delegation from our church. Again, see people at the Social Action Clearinghouse table during Coffee Hour.

But the larger challenge to me is for us to be about the process of saying, with no equivocation, that we believe in democracy; that we want to be engaged in the process of self-governing that happens when we elect people to represent us; and that in a congregation where we do not agree to positions, but rather agree to the process of being with one another in an open, rational, free and diverse way, that we can be in the same relationship with our representatives. As we go forward together, I aim to find ways to ask our elected representatives to occupy this pulpit, to share with us their visions for the kind of society they imagine. I aim to find ways for us not to approve of a particular politician or to tow a particular political line, but to invite into our circle of public relationships those expected to represent our community's interests. I aim for us, together, to raise our public profile not only to promote our community and our religion, but to assert that, even in a time of social divergence, the values of freedom and reason and toleration may be a proving ground on which representative democracy may still be affirmed.

Along the way, there will be those representatives who look at us funny, try to figure out who we are, will "size us up." Some will complain that we're acting outside of the right process, away from the norms they've established for their own behavior. And some will disappoint us with stupid decisions about the misuse of influence and giftcards for the poor, or with decisions with which we disagree. But in building public relationships of accountability with our representatives, we will be a more vital and engaged community, and we will encourage a fuller expression of democracy.

Democracy is in trouble, yes; but as long as a voice of civic engagement is raised, as long as dialogue and greater clarity and transparency are promoted, as long as the notion of shared interest and the greater good is shouted from the rooftops—and even on the corner of Charles and Franklin—that long may we yet live in hope.

It is up to us. It is up to us.