

Core Idea: CARE
Promote education to sustain democracy.

18th anniversary of the Bloomington Unitarian Church

October 22, 1939

Address marking the eightieth anniversary of the Unitarian Church in Bloomington, Illinois

Excerpt:

For democracy can only survive if the people want it, and to want it badly enough to defend it they must understand it.... Democracy is ill adapted to illiteracy, but in the hands of the wise it affords the best insurance for the realization of man's immemorial aspirations.

Background:

In October 1939, Stevenson returned to his hometown of Bloomington, Illinois to visit friends and family. He also delivered this speech. His family, on his mother's side, had long been members of the Unitarian Church. His great-grandfather, Jesse W. Fell, helped establish the Bloomington church. Stevenson's mother, Helen Davis Stevenson, was also a Unitarian. Stevenson followed his mother in matters of faith, and he attended this church during his youth.

Nineteen thirty-nine was a grim year. Nazi Germany invaded and conquered Poland to start World War II. Totalitarianism was on the march. Free nations such as Great Britain were on the defensive. Democracy, Stevenson said, was "locked in a death struggle in Europe." He felt that the end of freedom in this dark age would represent "one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the human race." Yet even in the face of this danger, Stevenson expressed faith in democratic principles and institutions. "The multitude of the wise is the welfare of the world," he said.

In this speech, Stevenson argued that a defense of democracy requires an educated citizenry. For Stevenson, education meant more than classrooms and textbooks. He believed education in a free society must include care for others, a balance of reason and idealism, disciplined emotion, and patience. He also criticized education that emphasized materialism over idealism.

For Stevenson, the best things in life were the hardest to find—like truth, or the hardest to keep—like democracy. "We talk too much of security, of safety," he said. "But democracy is dangerous! We give its enemies great freedom; we guarantee freedom of expression to thoughts we hate."

Stevenson would spend the next two years calling for U.S. military support for

FULL TEXT of address marking the eightieth anniversary of the Unitarian Church, Bloomington, Illinois:

During the 80 years' life of this church, our institutions have weathered several crises with little impairment; and we have enjoyed the blessings of freedom, peace and prosperity. But recently things have happened; our freedom has diminished; prosperity has declined; and our old age is troubled. More than half the peoples of the world are celebrating by war the 25th anniversary of "the war to end wars." The anniversary of "the war to make the world safe for democracy" finds dictators enthroned throughout much of the world and democracy struggling for survival, and, paradoxically, deliberately shackling itself to save itself. It is a noteworthy phenomenon that freedom always has to be suppressed in a crisis to save it for later enjoyment. But the question this time is whether freedom *can* be saved or whether the movement of the close-knit world is irresistible; whether the lights are doomed to go out one by one; and whether the darkness is the destiny of man, as it has been before. If our system *is* failing and if intellectual and cultural freedom *are* being abandoned and suppressed throughout the world, then we in America find ourselves in the position of complacent witnesses of one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the human race.

I suppose it is orthodox to start one of these ponderous dissertations on the prospects for democracy by defining democracy—by stating in concrete terms what it is we want to preserve as a bulwark against the shadows. There are countless definitions. Every political philosopher has produced at least one, and so far as I know they are all good, but I won't quote any of them! Rather let me remind you of a prevalent misconception and confusion of terms. What we commonly understand by democracy is not *only* a system of popular government, but also the individual liberties embodied in our Bill of Rights—freedom of worship, speech, press, assembly, trial by jury, due process of law, etc.—liberties which have flourished only in democratic soil. So let me suggest that what we really *want* is individual freedom, and what we *talk* about is democracy. And so will I!

But faith in democracy is ebbing throughout the world; it may even now be locked in a death struggle in Europe, and in spite of what you and I think about it, there are manifest doubts as to its survival even here. Why? And is our system no longer able to do the job? If so, it will have to go voluntarily or by force, for no human scheme of things is static, and man will mold his institutions to fit his needs and desires. What are our needs and desires? These questions suggest the problems that we must analyze and answer—not rhetorically and sentimentally—but realistically and critically. What do we really want most of all, and what sacrifices are we prepared to make for it? It seems to me that as a people who have enjoyed democracy, relative freedom and relative prosperity for 150 years we have come dangerously close to taking for granted the inheritance of the liberal

age as the inalienable property of our civilization. Yet freedom and democracy are not free gifts which will remain with us only if we wish it.

Actually democracy is the most difficult and most dangerous form of government. It achieves progress the hardest way in the belief that the process is as important as the result. In normal times the state waits upon the voluntary activity of its citizens to shape its policies and solve its hardest problems. The result, of course, is clumsy, inefficient, extravagant, undisciplined, unstable, and permits gross inequalities in wealth. Let me particularize by reminding you of a few of our many dilemmas.

To endure, any nation must take action adapted to meet effectively the conditions of its environment and the acts of the individuals must conform to these requirements. The contrast between coordinated effort and democratic decision is striking; for whereas cooperation means approximate unanimity of will, the democratic process means decision by division—by majorities, sometimes small ones. Such determinations can become wholly effective only as faith in the democratic process leads to their acceptance as controlling, notwithstanding individual dissent (which reminds one of Theodore Parker's remark that democracy means not "I'm as good as you are," but "you're as good as I am"). But such faith, such conformance, does not in fact exist in all cases. Prohibition was an illustration.

Another clearly related difficulty is the abstract character of most decisions at the time they are made. All general decision is abstract and relates to the future; and the enormous detailed action covered by a general decision is beyond the comprehension and imagination of most men. So one often finds a conflict between general decision which is approved and concrete action thereunder which is disapproved. But democratic decision is difficult to reverse promptly so we avoid such conflicts by disregarding the decision. Hence, the tendency to create illegality and thus destroy the democratic process. (But of course this is a field so important to the welfare of the legal profession that nothing can or should be done about it!)

One of the worst difficulties is the slowness inherent in the democratic process. There is (1) delay in recognizing the need for decision, (2) time required for making it, and (3) time necessary to promulgate and execute it. Sometimes in emergencies courageous leaders have circumvented the democratic process. Such solutions are usually illegal, however, and require an assumption of responsibility from which most men will shrink. Not only is effective timing often impossible in our system, but delay and indecision depress the initiative and enthusiasm required for proper execution of decisions.

And then there is the political obstacle—the competition between parties and groups for public favor. We are all too familiar with the techniques of political tactics—the imputing of false motives and the everlasting drawing of "red herrings." Avoidance of political conflict and disruption of organization frequently make it necessary to resort to weak compromises or result in failure to make any decision at all.

Again there is the turnover in leadership occasioned by the party system, with the result

that our process either affords no stability of direction or requires a larger quantity of qualified leaders than would otherwise be sufficient. Added to this is the system of selection, which, being political and partisan, rewards political abilities rather than abilities for the job. In short, it is apparent that democracy requires leadership of the highest order, yet the system is by no means designed to furnish it. And the quality of men who are risking private peace and security for public ingratitude and insecurity is probably decreasing. To me it has always been a marvel that an unchristian thirst for power and prestige has supplied as good leadership as it has.

But it serves no purpose to multiply the counts in the indictment of democracy. We can readily admit her deficiencies; we can readily admit that she is at a disadvantage in competition with streamlined totalitarian ideology. We cannot expect democracies managed by millions to maneuver with the agility of governments managed by a corporal, or even a corporal's guard!

So, acknowledging our technical handicaps, let us also acknowledge that within every country enemies are bred by discontent and the marching millions of the unemployed in Britain, France and America have been a grave danger to democracy *at home* and is perhaps the most effective propaganda against democracy *abroad*. The right and the duty of earning our daily bread are fundamental to normal human beings. A "hand-out" by whatever name it may be called will feed the body but it starves self respect. The foundation of the success of Nazism, Fascism and Communism is the simple proposition that under modern conditions men cannot have both work and freedom. The war may temporarily relieve the pressure of material ill being on spiritual well being, but when the hurricane is spent I wonder if the same old question won't be there again clamoring for solution. My guess is that the seductions of Marxist dogma which traces all evil to the imperfections of the economic system will arise to plague us again; that democracy will still be confronted with the only idea common to 19th century liberalism and present day socialism; the belief that the consummation of individual freedom can only be achieved if we break the "despotism of physical want."

I have tried to sketch crudely some of the perils and the problems. I can suggest no remedies. But of one thing I'm sure; that it's not too late or too soon to commence preparation for the defense of democracy. For democracy can only survive if the people want it, and to want it badly enough to defend it they must understand it. So our defense is education—education in its meaning and its relative worth. I can suggest some broad essentials to wisdom as a basis for such education in defense of democracy. The first is perspective. Perspective is attained by broadening and lengthening experience far beyond the boundaries, either in time or space, of the life span of an individual. It is perfectly evident that the shock and terror of incidents decline if it is realized that the same sort of thing has happened many times before, and that the world has survived. The thinking of Plato and Aristotle regarding democracy is as real, as valid, as informing as ever it was; and mere nearness in time does not make the views of lesser minds more important. The history of tyranny is long—even longer than the history of democracy. Its transient character, the manner in which it has always nurtured the seeds of its own destruction make it desirable to follow its record whenever and wherever it has appeared in human

history.

Henry Wriston, President of Brown University, said not long ago: “It will be helpful to perspective in these days of doubt regarding democracy to realize that democracy is not some fresh and untried invention, that it is a sturdy growth maturing through the centuries, that in Britain and America, at least, its roots have struck deep into the soil. Where there was a mere veneer of democracy, the intense heat of the World War and its aftermath has blistered it and destroyed its finish. Where democracy was grafted onto an alien stock, the graft in some cases, has parted and the bough withered. But those events, unhappy and unfortunate as they are, do not affect the validity of its principles or the sturdiness of its growth.”

The second essential of wisdom as a basis for education in democracy is disciplined emotion, or response to values. Our emotions have no depth, no warmth. The age is cynical. We are more afraid of sentimentality than slavery. The accent in art is on ugliness. We call it “honesty” or “realism.” Popular books are written debunking George Washington. The Constitution has been interpreted as an effort of speculators to make good their gamble. The emphasis has shifted from triumphs and advances to shortcomings and failure. We talk of the “tragedy of youth” and the “lost generation.” Spiritual achievement is interpreted in materialistic terms. The story of the race has been robbed of the sense of victory and achievement, and all too often is interpreted as a record of exploitation, frustration and perfidy. Science is the only success story now, and with even hand it serves destruction as well as construction. We talk too much of security, of safety. But democracy is dangerous! We give its enemies great freedom; we guarantee freedom of expression to thoughts we hate. Safety first is an idea corrosive of democracy, for democracy is a great human adventure, and the sense of adventure is emotional.

Don’t misunderstand me. I am not counseling an emotional upheaval. The asylums are already overcrowded with intense, well-meaning people. What I am suggesting is eager minds and warm hearts and a sense of values. We can’t have what we want unless we know what we want and want it hard enough. Loring Merwin sent me the other day some clippings from the Pantagraph on the occasion of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of this church in 1909. I was struck by this passage from a sermon by Rev. S. A. Eliot: “After all, the controlling powers in human life are not intellectual but emotional. Faith, hope and love are functions of the heart, not the head. The noblest intellect is that which is shot through with passion. Reason must be *lifted* on the shoulders of a great emotion before its beacon can enlighten weary and distressed humanity.” That sounds intemperate to us nowadays. Perhaps it is. But it suggests what I’m trying to say. We have to select our values, separate the gods from the half gods, and then enthrone them with our hearts as well as our minds.

Patience and industry are other constituents of wisdom because our education for democracy is an education in ideas and ideas are harder to grasp than facts. The pursuit of truth is easy now. Books are plentiful, communication constant and the daily newspaper in one day gives you more comprehensive information about the world near and far than

you could get in months when this church was founded. But learning is hard work, and in a sense we seem to have neutralized the advantages our times offer to education. The schools furnish buses, books, materials and teachers that were once hard to acquire. But the emphasis seems to be vocational and materialistic; the motive of gain has replaced the motive of service and materialism has replaced idealism. As everywhere else in our social organism one detects that security is the ideal—that youth is seldom animated by the will to know for the sake of the freedom that is in knowledge. A short cut to a salary is the purpose and end of education. This is *not* the best education for democracy.

Democracy seeks to fulfill an ancient idea: “The multitude of the wise is the welfare of the world.” Democracy is ill adapted to illiteracy, but in the hands of the wise it affords the best insurance for the realization of man’s immemorial aspirations. With better perspective, better values, patience and industry democracy can and will become a more efficient instrument. Meanwhile history has taught us that justice is the best thing in life—it is well to remember that Greece and Rome loved *peace* more than justice! and when we get impatient with democracy it is also well to recall that the history of today, as yesterday, teaches us that the price of efficiency is often tyranny and the surrender of those vital human values, those liberties, which distinguish the free man from the slave, which exalt the dignity of the individual as an inviolable, rational soul and not merely the creature of the state. When in doubt let us remember that “the things which are seen are temporal; the things which are not seen are eternal.”

Dictatorship rejects the concept of individual freedom and the inner life of man for which he is responsible to God alone. It lays claim to the whole of him for the society of which he is an insignificant part. This concept in essence is anti-religious. If man has no freedom of choice for thought, expression or action how can we have any religious faith? Let me recall some words of President Roosevelt which cannot be repeated too often:

“Storms from abroad directly challenge three institutions indispensable to Americans, now as always. The first is religion. It is the source of the other two—democracy and international good faith.

“Religion, by teaching man his relationship to God, gives the individual a sense of his own dignity and teaches him to respect himself by respecting his neighbors.

“In a modern civilization, all three—religion, democracy and international good faith—complement each other.

“An ordering of society which relegates religion, democracy and good faith among nations to the background can find no place within the ideals of the Prince of Peace.”

So we retain our ancient faith in democracy and continue to believe, to borrow a phrase from Tall[e]yrand, that “the only thing wiser than anyone is everyone.” We shall not forget that the course of human progress has suffered tragic reverses in the past. It may again in the future. It has lost many a battle. It can never be ultimately defeated. We in

America *can* save individual liberty. We *can*, in Lincoln’s words, “Nobly save this last best hope of earth!”

— Adlai E. Stevenson II

Discussion Questions:

1. Why did Stevenson believe that democracy is difficult and dangerous?
2. At which point in the speech does Stevenson touch on Madison’s concept of “factions”?
3. What does Stevenson say is the most effective propaganda against democracy abroad?
4. According to Stevenson, why is democracy the most preferential form of government?

Keywords: Unitarian Church, Nazi Germany, World War II, WW II, totalitarianism, human dignity, democracy, Bill of Rights, freedom of worship, freedom of speech, free speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, liberal, liberalism, party system, unemployed, Marxism, Marxist dogma, reason, dictatorship, forms of government