

## **“We the People”**

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I am an American. I am a daughter, sister, and mom. I am college educated. I am a cisgender woman, which is to say I identify with the gender of female assigned me at birth. I am straight. I am white. I drink lattes with oat milk. I shop at Whole Foods. I am liberal. And I drive a red Chevy pickup.

And you? What are your identities?

As people, it is normal to claim particular identities, to feel affinity for people with similar identities, and even to sort ourselves into groups of shared identities. These identities can be assigned to us by fate or chosen by our preferences. They can be shallow—true perhaps, but not central to our sense of who we are—or they can be deeply rooted by cultural or emotional connections that strongly motivate our actions and responses.

In Ezra Klein’s early 2020 book, *Why We’re Polarized*, he argues that voters are sorted into polarized parties using what he calls “mega-identities.” To explain the idea of “mega-identity,” Klein points to a 2004 ad by a conservative interest group against then presidential candidate, Howard Dean. Klein writes:

In the ad, an older white couple is stopped outside a shop with patriotic bunting and asked about Dean’s plan to raise taxes.

“What do I think?” the man replies. “Well, I think Howard Dean should take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, *New York Times*-reading—” Then his wife cuts in: “Body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont, where it belongs.” And that, my friends, is pure, uncut mega-identity politics. (69)

Layer upon layer of identities stack upon one another to become a mega-identity. We associate choice of coffee (Starbucks or Dunkin’?) with choice of food (burgers or sushi?) with what someone drives (Prius or pickup?). We assume people that identify as members of this group would never do x, y, or z. Or expect people that do a, b, or c to also identify as part of this group rather than that group. We’ve sorted people not only into boxes, but boxes big enough to contain a whole cluster of identities.

According to Klein, political parties were not always so polarized, nor were they always so sorted by mega-identities. Indeed, in 1950, the American Political Science Association released a massive report warning that there was too much diversity within each party and no real choice between the parties. (2) Each party had a range of liberal and conservative points of view within the party that meant belonging to one party or the other did not automatically define you in any one way. Concerned about these muddled parties, the report called for parties to have more internal unity of position as well as clear difference from the other party. In other words, they needed more polarization. *Be careful what you wish for!?!*

While Klein certainly has concerns about the many ways the media, political fundraising, and more reinforce polarization, he doesn't entirely dismiss polarization as a problem on its own. In his concluding chapter, Klein explains,

“In a multiparty system, polarization is sometimes required for our political disagreements to express themselves. The alternative to polarization often isn't consensus but suppression. We don't argue over the problems we don't discuss. But we don't solve them, either.” (249)

Sometimes we need to be clear about the differences we hold in order to tackle the challenges we face. The differences we hold are real. For one, they reflect our responses to shifting demographics and to social changes that are creating a more racially, culturally, and religiously diverse nation. Changes that are not going away but will demand political answers of who will hold power and whose grievances will be heard. And so, the question, Klein suggests, is not how to reverse polarization to some idealized former era, but rather how to reform the political system to be able to function amidst polarization.

Klein offers suggestions for reforms to the political system, but this is a sermon, not in fact an essay on political parties. Rather than further delve into Klein's book, I want to tell you about my experience on Election Day in Pennsylvania as a liberal minister.

Firstly, I want to thank everyone who expressed support for my work on Election Day. And I want to give a shout out to all the members of this congregation who also worked the polls or as poll monitors. Supporting the democratic process is part of our principles as Unitarian Universalists.

Like many of you, I have been fearful that our democratic institutions are under threat. Unfortunately, efforts to suppress the voices of some, particularly black and brown voices, is nothing new in our nation. Volunteering as a non-partisan presence to support peaceful

voting was an easy choice—not only as an American citizen and voter, but also as liberal, UU clergy.

I was assigned to Berks County, Pennsylvania in partnership with another clergy person. Most of the day, we stayed in Reading, the city you may know from its rail line in the game of *Monopoly*. Today Reading is a majority minority city with about 80% identifying as non-white or mixed race. The polling locations we visited reflected these demographics in both the poll workers and the voters. In these locations, I was warmly welcomed in my collared clergy shirt and bright yellow “Safety Squad” sweatshirt from the organizers of the “Election Defenders” project. In one location, I helped put up “Vote Here” yard signs in English and Spanish. In another location, I noticed they did not have any yard signs. Returning to the first site, they happily said I could bring some of their extra signs to the other location. I answered parking questions of voters and helped a visually impaired woman to the door of her location. There were no lines. All was peaceful and, quite frankly, a bit dull in the very best way!

Then we received a request from Election Defenders to check on a polling location outside of the city in a more rural area following a voter complaint of an intimidating electioneer. As with the urban locations, I first walked into the polling room to quickly identify myself to the person in charge before moving back outside. However, as I approached, she met me with a gently sarcastic, “The Safety Squad is here.” After identifying myself and our work to insure peaceful access to voting, she assured me that there had been no issues.

As I lingered outside, I chatted first with a respectful electioneer who was standing to the side of the walkway and offering pamphlets with an ask to consider her preferred candidate. She mentioned that another electioneer had left for a bit to feed his dog. When he returned in his red Chevy pickup, I started the conversation there. As we chatted about trucks, he stood on the walkway to the building, halving the access to the building for voters and rather insistently handing pamphlets to people. I strongly suspect he was the source of the initial complaint. Suggesting he might stand to the side to make more space for voters, I was simply ignored. And soon the head of the polling location was beckoning me over to tell me that she had called in about me, learned I had no official role, and that I needed to stop talking to voters.

In short, I was the problem. I was identified as a source of voter intimidation.

Now, first of all, I’m still a bit of a “good girl” who does not like being told I’m doing something *wrong*. Nor am I someone who likes to be told to shut up. As you might imagine,

a slew of emotions began to churn within me. I took my cue, spoke briefly to the two electioneers, and left.

What made this location such a different experience? Here is where Klein's book comes in. I would suggest that I was not seen as non-partisan in either space. In the city, I was identified as an ally for the coalition of minority voters. In the rural, predominantly white location, I was identified as a threat, or, at the very least, as an agitating outsider.

And yet, I truly wanted to be non-partisan. Yes, of course, I have political opinions and vote accordingly. However, on that day and here today in this pulpit, my commitment and deeper value is to the importance of democracy as an expression of my religious faith.

When I think about the various threads in my religious journey that led me to Unitarian Universalism, there are two on the foreground today. One is the freedom of conscience, the freedom to choose according to my values without coercion or the threat of violence. The other is universalism, the radical notion that all lives are worthy of love and inclusion. Together, these fueled my desire to drive to Pennsylvania, risk the possibility of harm, and to do what I could to insure all people had the experience of voting peaceably without intimidation.

I am glad I went *and* I am deeply grieved by the experience of polarized partisanship even in this work. Klein's work helps frame my experience by underscoring the larger context of our current polarization. We are in the midst of major social change, especially regarding the shift of demographics of power away from a white majority that has long been dominant. Because I *am* a universalist and believe in the worth and dignity of every person, I am in the fight for a multi-racial, religiously plural, diverse and equitable nation. I am *not* interested in suppressing the voices of non-Christians or of People of Color to preserve power for a white, Christian minority. I *disagree* with those who believe otherwise and if this sorts us into two camps, then I accept that reality. Sometimes encountering difference means being clear and open about our disagreements. As Klein says, "We don't argue over the problems we don't discuss. But we don't solve them, either."

We are living in a partisan world where political affiliation has become an identity that pulls us farther apart from others. Sometimes for good reason. We may not like conflict or being told we are wrong by another, but we may in fact disagree on some very significant issues.

Even so, I like to think that there is still freedom to mix up our identities. To be a Republican and an environmentalist—like Governor Charlie Baker. Or to be a Democrat

and prefer Dunkin' coffee. Or, like me, to be a liberal who drives a red Chevy pickup rather than a Prius. Resisting the pull of these mega-identities to sort us not only by party affiliation but also by coffee preference might help blunt some of the polarizing forces. Paying attention to the ways we are not divide—or need not be—might help to retain some of what binds us together as a nation.

The U.S. Constitution begins with the words, “We the people.” That *we* has always been a mix of opinions and identities. That *we* has also lionized inclusion while suppressing voices. Nearly 250 years into our experiment with democracy, the people of the United States are still striving towards “a more perfect union” as we wrestle with how to define that “we” today. As each of us participates in this struggle, my hope is that we hold fast to both the power of individual conscience that resists polarizing mega-identities *and* to the Universalist affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person, which, I believe, calls for a multi-racial, religiously plural, diverse and equitable nation.

In our changing world, we will disagree with some. Even so, perhaps we might resist the urge to demonize those in the “other” group by holding fast to the common humanity and dignity that connects us all, even when we disagree.

So may it be. Amen.