

# WE, THE PEOPLE...T.J.

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Bulletin Quote: UU 5<sup>th</sup> Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

UU 6<sup>th</sup> Principle: The goal of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Jedidah Morse captured Jefferson's theology as well as anyone, scornfully dismissing it as "Reason and Nature deified and adored." ...Jefferson has been called "the most self-consciously theological of all American presidents.]" --Forrest Church, "*So Help Me God*"

Jefferson, to his friends, referred to himself variously as a "Theist," "Deist," "Unitarian," "Rational Christian," and "Epicurean."

## Main Talk:

This talk was initially assembled about 2007 so please be clear that this talk addresses the application of two of our UU principles in a general way rather than pointed toward any current issues, issues of which I could not have been aware years ago.

Let's introduce our subject today by reading two of UU's seven principles as printed inside your Order of Worship. Our UU 5<sup>th</sup> principle covenants and affirms--, and let's read in unison, -- "The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large." And our 6<sup>th</sup> principle covenants and affirms, again in unison, -- "The goal of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all."

Those words might not be as stirring and poetic as some of those by Thomas Jefferson, but they do track right down his philosophical path.

I'm obligated to start with a confession. Most of you know I am a real fan of old Tom and full of biases in his favor. Progressive thinkers have always been strong supporters of the Jeffersonian perspective on abolition of slavery, minimal government, and focus upon human rights and the individual vs. Hamilton and his Federalist's push for a more traditional European Government--powerful, domineering, and intrusive under strong religious influence under the assumption that mankind has to be controlled, told by government what it should and should not do and what it will do for you in the interest of the "common good." That is, until Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal invoked Hamiltonian methods and the progressives and conservatives did a switcheroo from their traditional allegiances. When Madison uncharacteristically called for a day of wartime prayer, John Adams described such a reversal of rolls elegantly: "Our two great parties have crossed over the valley and taken possession of each other's mountain." After hundreds of carefully researched books over the prior 200 years by various Jeffersonian historians, the new fashion of tearing down of American icons struck in 1960's and early 70's and finally got around to our most esteemed founding father, TJ. In author Joseph Ellis' words, "He became a contested prize in the ongoing cultural wars." He was jerked out of the context of his place and times and measured by expectations in place 250 years after his birth. I've bristled privately and publicly, sometimes from this lectern, at proposals to change the name of our UU District from Thomas Jefferson to anything else. I'm pleased to report TJ is in resurgence among historians and politicians although we will likely lose the name as UUA districts merge in the coming years. As Ellis reports, the general public never backed off on their allegiance to the man. This was driven home

to Jefferson critic, Ellis, by an elderly woman who rose at the end of his presentation in Richmond to say, “Young man, you are a mere pigeon on the statue of Thomas Jefferson.” I will continue to polish that statue and be proud of my ancestors’ involvement with TJ and his personal efforts to work with them to limit the spread of slavery north of the Ohio River. End of confession.

There is a component of the 5<sup>th</sup> principle that may be assumed based upon our history of peoples over the ages regarding rights of conscience and the use of the democratic process. And, that component is that, if there is a government, it needs to be a government of “We, the people...” in order to preserve that right of conscience and the use of the democratic process. An overseeing structure, beyond the control of “We, the people...,” sooner or later will fall victim to the frailties of human nature that surface from authoritarianism. The right of conscience and the democratic process become threatened. “We, the people...” have been assigned by Jefferson and his many cohorts to be the check on the exercise of that overseeing responsibility.

Similarly, there is a component of the 6<sup>th</sup> principle that may be assumed based upon our history over the ages. And, that component is that, **if** there are to be governments, they need to be governments of “We, the people...” to achieve our goal of peace, liberty, and justice for all. Overseeing structures, beyond the control of “We, the people...,” sooner or later will fall victim to the frailties of human nature that will:

trade our peace for the liberties of others, as in Pax Romana, 200 years of peace maintained by widespread brutality within and at the margins of the realm,

or trade our liberties for the peace of others, as in ethnically cleansed captive populations living behind city or nation's walls,

or trade justice for all, the us's **and** them's of the world, in order to **selectively** bestow the warmth and comfort of peace and liberty on favorites of the moment; **them**, but not **us**, or on **us**, but not **them**.

We have some indications that Jefferson's application of these words, this democracy vision, "We, the people..." is the right path. The Europeans have fought amongst themselves since way before there were recognizable countries in Europe. Since WW II, the more democratic Europeans have enjoyed a rare and historic respite from their ongoing intra-continental death and destruction. However, they and we, have continued to reach outside our borders in an effort to spread peace, liberty, justice for all, including the right of conscience. We UU's share those goals but there may be a better way to help others.

I think that the part the early Virginians and T J got right is that it all does indeed come back to "We, the people..." Today, we may take democracy for granted. Historically, Thomas Jefferson and others recognized it as a fragile approach to governance. Democracy places a major burden on the citizenry, or at least upon the citizenry that is both privileged to and chooses to vote.

Harry Stein, doing some historic research on the subject of fragility of a democracy offers:

“I remember being surprised, as I wandered through the archives with my (most modern) sensibility, at how often the argument was made by men and women that democracy was a **fragile** thing—and that its exercise was a serious and demanding business.

I first ran across it in a letter to the *Times* dated February 3, 1873, in regard to a legal case involving pioneer suffragist Susan B. Anthony. The letter, signed simply “A Woman,” argued that well intentioned as Miss Anthony’s efforts were, most women simply didn’t care enough about politics and world affairs to undertake “the duties which are incumbent upon voters; for if we are made voters, we are in honor bound to fulfill to the utmost all the duties attached to the so-called ‘privilege.’” (**in honor bound to fulfill to the utmost all the duties attached to the so-called ‘privilege,’** words and expectations we don’t often hear nowadays.)

Stein continues, “It shows how far we’ve traveled that it now rings as almost absurdly quaint, this notion that exercising the franchise should demand something approaching a cool head and a real grasp of the issues. Yet, back then, it was an article of faith that republican government was dependent for its very survival on an ethical and aware electorate.

Four decades after A Woman’s letter appeared in the *Times*, that understanding still remained at the heart of the suffrage debate. Teddy Roosevelt had grappled with the issue for years, under intense pressure from both sides, when in 1912, as an ex-President in the midst of an attempted comeback, he at last, very tentatively, endorsed votes for

women. But it was with the passionate admonition that if ordinary women failed to “live lives of duty, not only our democracy but our civilization itself will perish.” The sexism sounds pretty silly today, but looking beyond that at the serious concern on the part of serious people, there was a sense of fragility about our democratic experiment, then only a little over 100 years old.

One of my mentors, (although he doesn't know it), Thomas Jefferson, saw the voters' capabilities – educated, interested, responsible --applied to the decisions placed before them as the source of democratic strength and, lack of such responsible application, its greatest threat. We can be confident that TJ had read Plato's caution that claims democracy works only until the majority of the electorate realizes it can vote to line its own pockets from the government coffers thus, with no further effort on their part, take from the resources of those who fund those coffers. In Jefferson's words, “If a nation expects to be ignorant—and free—in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” Jefferson, convinced that democracy can only be effective in the hands of enlightened people, as governor of Virginia in 1779 he proposed a public education program that would raise the educational standards of future voters regardless of financial means. To gauge how far he was ahead of his contemporaries, the U.K. did not establish a primary public education system until Parliament passed the Education Act of 1870, nearly 100 years later.

We may be tempted to read into Jefferson's words an elitist attitude, only the highly educated or well found should be allowed to vote. We need to be careful with that

presumption in his environment where illiteracy was by far in the majority, thus communications were limited in the extreme, the languages of the frontier were unwritten, and the frontier wasn't too far west if I-85. The lands north of the Ohio River, now Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin did not have one European settlement but only three military facilities in transition from French to British. Later, in the great tug of war between Alexander Hamilton and our Tom, it was the big government Federalist Hamilton, an inveterate elitist, who failed where TJ was successful in reaching out to the tradesmen and literate workers of the time. It's enlightening sometimes to read old books to hear the historical view in the context of the age. This analysis is more than 80 years old and from *Jefferson and Hamilton, the Struggle for Democracy in America*, by Claude G. Bowers, (1925)—

“Had Jefferson been even richer than Hamilton in brilliant leaders, he would not have made the latter's fatal blunder of assuming (those leaders) to be enough. (Jefferson) was too much the practical politician to be impressed with a brilliant staff of officers – without privates. He set out to arouse the masses, mobilize, drill, and lead them. Above all, it was his intention to lead. Within a year, Adams, with desperation and disgust, was to observe the divisions among his Federalists and to comment that, ”Virginia moves in a solid column...the discipline of the [Jefferson] party is as severe as the Prussian and deserters are not spared.”

Bowers reports: The first necessity was to get the men to discipline. (Remember, MEN, because Anthony had yet to convince Roosevelt, and sufficient others, that women could make good decisions too.) A vast number of the masses had no conception of their political power and were indifferent to the vote. Thousands over the country were

disfranchised by property qualifications, and one of the prime purposes of the new party would be to break these down. The immediate problem was to awaken the interest of those who, having the vote, did not appreciate the privilege. With many of these, this was due to the lack of political consciousness; with others, to the feeling that it was useless for the unimportant to attempt to influence governmental action. To the latter it would be necessary to prove the possibilities of the concerted action of large numbers of un-influential men... No squeamishness in the mobilization either – the possession of the vote was enough. Soon, very soon, strange, disturbing things would be seen, even in New England – cabinetmakers, shoe makers, mechanics perking up to politics, with evidence of organization here and there. Federalist leaders, promoters of more government oversight, involvement, dependency, and control, would soon be complaining that organization was conspiracy against the “government.” In New Hampshire they would be calling those uniting for political action “**insurgents**.” The insolence of the Jeffersonians appealing to the people for support would be frowned upon as degrading. “Of course,” said a Massachusetts paper, “there can be but two parties in a country – the friends of order and its foes.”

And such people! The very riff-raff that one would never invite into one’s parlor – “desperate, embarrassed, unprincipled, disorderly, ambitious, disaffected, and morose men.” Were not these the propertyless who wasted their earnings in a grogshop? And who were these petty agitators? Who but “Jacobins” holding forth “in the bar-rooms of Rhode Island and Vermont and trying to stir up opposition. “ Wretched offal after all – but what a pity that Jefferson should countenance, at least of all cultivate, such people.

“Mr. Jefferson appears to have shown rather too much of a disposition to cultivate vulgar prejudices,” wrote Wolcott, and “accordingly he will become popular in the ale-houses.”

Miserable “Jacobins!” Disreputable clowns of the bar-rooms! And such unthinkable methods! Here – there – everywhere, when a few men could be gathered together, some one appeared to deliver free lectures on practical politics. And such subjects! “Discipline;” “How to Make Men Follow their File Leaders.” Bowers doesn’t say, but I suspect a number of those opposing a larger, more intrusive federal government now called the “insurgents” frequenting the grog shops and delivering free lectures, encouraging all to vote regardless of race and economic class, could comfortably occupy a seat next to you in our UU churches of today. Wouldn’t that be fun to compare notes with them during our after-service coffee?

Thomas Jefferson knew that the part education plays in the quality of the thought processes is BIG! He was an early and prime driver behind public education. We see, in our history, the spreading access, and in fact compulsion, to educate more and more of our populace paralleled the spread of voter rights to the present day. [Harry Stein—]...Indeed, the record shows that, far from degrading the culture, the twentieth century’s respect for the everyday concerns of ordinary people—the popular entertainments, fashions, shifting tastes; yes, even the interest in the lives of the celebrated---has in many ways been a healthy thing. A people’s history is not all statesmanship and earth-shaking events, but the sum total of innumerable concerns, great and small, and the values played out daily in private life. Not just how people relate to what they read on the front page,

but to one another, to their children, to their friends. We are not automatons, but highly complex beings, or should be.

...some of the great movements in history are themselves largely emotionally driven. Our faltering rebellion against England might well have collapsed had it not been for Thomas Paine's stirring call to courage in *The Crisis*; on meeting *Uncle Tom's Cabin* author Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lincoln himself called her "the little lady who started the big war."

Yet looking around today, it is increasingly clear that those from the past some readily dismiss as backward also had some things right. For coming as they did from an infinitely more serious and disciplined world, they were contemptuous of lazy minds that made easy assumptions without firm proof; they demanded rigor and accountability not just of themselves but in the culture at large. It is hardly for nothing that, in times past, the American system of public education ranked as the very best on earth.

Obviously, in the years between then and now, we have seen some erosion of those standards. But far from the least, especially over the last several decades, has indeed been what amounts to a systematic attack on the primacy of facts and logic over emotions and feelings that would unsettle Jefferson, the admonisher of clear and substantive thought.

Astonishing as it sometimes was to those of us who went to school as recently as the fifties and early sixties, in classrooms across America we went through a period where what children know was routinely less important than how they feel about themselves. – emotions became the criteria, whether it is Oprah inducing an HIV-positive gay man to come out on the air while the audience weeps and cheers or whether

it is Catherine MacKinnon demanding the suspension of traditional rules of evidence in women's rights cases, with the views of "the reasonable women" accorded special weight; at its most benign, it enables an attractive chief executive to lie under oath, seduce an intern, and find cover in the debased cry "everyone does it."

Has our political system been compromised in precisely some of the ways the early critics feared? Are more and more elections decided not on serious consideration of the issues but on outright appeals to emotion, or spin, or the candidates' looks or physical characteristics. It is hardly for nothing that historians speculate that Washington, and certainly Lincoln, would be unelectable today.

What were the expectations, the academic standards over the course of the last century or so ago? Let's look at some sample questions from an **1885** examination for **admission** to Jersey City ***High School***. (*make copies and hand out*)

You'll see that the first set of questions is on algebra, considered a foundation of logical thinking. If x is thus and so, and if what is known about y is also limited, evaluating the two can lead to a rational conclusion about z, a valuable thought training and discipline.

Next is geography. It may possibly be more important today to have a grasp of what is where in our now much smaller and interconnected world to properly interpret what reports we hear. Following is U.S. History, critical to an understanding the record of who and what we are as a country, plus it helps to see ourselves as others may see us. Finally,

Grammer, to combat the widespread problem of people not understanding clearly what they are reading and what is being said.

(See Handout at end of talk for printing)

So, is there a phrase we and Thomas Jefferson could champion as we pursue our 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> principles, the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large, and the goal of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all? I suggest an emphasis upon the seat of power TJ defined as, “We, the people...”

And, if forced to reduce these thoughts into a single word, how about “education?” Now we have something actionable, within our community and beyond. And it is something we can individually influence and participate in. Here’s the take-home for your consideration: What are you doing, what are we doing, to raise the standards of unbiased education to make “We, the people...” better decision-makers?

Think of the capabilities we have in our little group. The schools report they need tutors for those struggling and we have a dozen or so teachers, many with advanced degrees. The schools report rampant peer pressure NOT to strive to succeed and we have nearly as many counselors, coaches, and psychologists as we have teachers. The schools report they have way too many uninvolved parents that don’t value education and we have a

plethora of parents and grandparents that know and have taught the value of education, if only to their children. The schools report they need more community involvement, people that can set aside fancy theories, theologies, agendas, and help kids learn critical thinking and just good common sense.

Citizens may or may not choose to be voters. But, as “We the People..” let us promote their capability to discern and value for themselves the differences among the candidates’ principles, accomplishments, and ideas. Then, “We the People...” can be the best we can be in pursuing our principles.

(See 1885 examination for high school admission – next page.)

## An **1885** examination for **admission** to Jersey City **High School**

### Algebra

1. Define a polynomial. Make a literal trinomial.
2. Write a homogeneous quadrinomial of the third degree. Express the cube root of  $10ax$  in two ways.
3. Find the sum and difference of  $3x-4ay+7cd-4xy+16$  and  $10ay-3x-8xy+7cd-13$

### Geography

1. Name four principal ranges of mountains in Asia, three in Europe, and three in Africa
2. Name the states on the west bank of the Mississippi, and the capital of each.

### U.S. History

1. What event do you connect with 1565, 1607, 1620, 1664, 1775?
2. What caused the Mexican War? What was the result? What American general commanded at the capture of the City of Mexico?

### Grammar

1. Write a sentence containing a noun used as an attribute, a verb in the perfect tense potential mood, and a proper adjective.
2. Write the declension of (a) bird, (b) man, (c) fly, (d) fox, (e) it.
3. Make three sentences, using the plural of sheep (a) in the nominative case, (b) in the possessive, (c) in the objective.

#### Answers:

1. *Polynomial: Algebraic expression with terms designated by the use of plus or minus signs. Liter trinomial:  $x+y+z$*
2.  *$2-x^3-2x^2+3x+5$ ; cube root  $10ax$*
3. *Sum:  $6ay+14cd-12xy+3$  Difference:  $6x-14ay+4xy+29$*

#### Geography

1. *Himalayas, Urals, Hindu Kush, and Khangal; Alps, Carpathians, and Pyrenees; Atlas, Drakenberg, and Ethiopian Highlands*
2. *Lousiana (Baton Rouge), Arkansas (Little Rock), Missouri (Jefferson City), Iowa (Des Moines), and Minnesota (St. Paul).*

#### U.S. History

1. *1565 – founding of St. Augustine, 1607 – Jamestown founded, 1620 – 103 Pilgrims land at Plymouth Rock, 1664 – British seize New Netherlands from the Dutch, 1775 – Battles of Lexington and Concord.*
2. *Manifest destiny, diplomatic blundering and instability of American government; California, New Mexico and Arizona became part of the U.S. and Texas border was established at the Rio Grande; Zachary Taylor.*

*Grammar*

1. *My lack of expertise tells me that I am going to fail this English test, since I'm guessing a lot.*
2. *a bird, birds; b man, men; c fly, flies; d fox, foxes; e it, its.*
3. *The sheep are in the meadow. The sheep's wool was sheared. We sheared all the sheep.*