

THE AGE OF HUMANITY

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October 8, 2023

On Tuesday, Florida Representative Matt Gaetz led a mutiny of eight radical conservatives to topple Kevin McCarthy from his role as Speaker of the House. Ever since, I've been wondering if we have finally seen the apotheosis of Western individualism — the revelation of its essential character. It's true that McCarthy virtually guaranteed his own demise. As a condition of gaining hard-line support for his speakership, he agreed to allow one representative to call a vote to vacate the chair. But allowing the will of one to dictate terms to the other 434 makes the point: the boomerang of individual freedom has returned in a massively destructive way.

Individualism has long been viewed as the hallmark of the modern way of life. It's an approach we call liberalism, a term that uses liberal in its original sense, meaning a person who is free rather than enslaved. Over the past 500 years in the West, the source of authority has shifted from the divinely appointed primacy of the church and the divine right of kings to the sovereign individual. The primacy of the individual in the political realm is known as democracy; in the economic realm, as free enterprise; and in the religious realm, as Protestantism, which eventually gave birth to Unitarian Universalism, perhaps the purest religious expression of the primacy of the individual.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the freedom of individual expression, the right of individual conscience, and the sanctity of individual choice. Especially in a world where tyrants and thugs continually run roughshod over individual freedoms and rights, our commitment as people of faith to the freedom of the individual is a signal virtue. I believe it also happens to be our Achilles heel. It can boomerang back on us as well.

Bill Schulz served as president of the Unitarian Universalist Association from 1985 to 1993, then became head of Amnesty USA for a decade, followed by a time as president of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. He's now a senior fellow at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Schulz begins his review of a new book by Isaac Barnes May titled *God-Optional Religion in 20th-Century America* by observing: "Here's a paradox Unitarian Universalists face: while our theology falls outside the mainstream of American religious culture, we still understand ourselves to be a religious community. This means that we need to attract people who have rejected traditional forms of religion but who are still interested in religious or at least spiritual practice within some kind of institutional context. That's a tough needle to thread."

Schulz goes on to observe that traditionally Unitarian Universalism has appealed to people who have rejected an earlier religious affiliation but are still open to institutional religion. But the situation has changed. Today, at least one-third of Americans are not churched and don't want to be, and their numbers are growing. Many of these people describe themselves as spiritual but not religious, which often means they aren't interested in committing to a particular brand of faith. Schulz says, "It's a hard sell to convince large numbers of them that they need to be part of a formal structure in order to be spiritually fulfilled. That's one reason some of our most creative religious leaders are experimenting with more loosely structured ways of connecting people, especially digitally."

The question for Unitarian Universalism has always been how to find theological unity within a religious tradition that champions individuality and thus breeds theological diversity. The answer, Schulz concludes, has often been to abandon the search for theological unity to focus on the less complex task of developing a sense of unity based on political alignment. He says, "As common ground and common interest in theological questions receded, Unitarian Universalism took on more and more the appearance of still one more political interest group." He adds that as someone who has spent much of his life working for political change, he can hardly criticize people who coalesce around political agendas. But political unity, he insists, is not a sufficient basis for developing a theological identity.

Maybe the problem begins with how we understand our identity as individuals. Walt Whitman's iconic poem "Song of Myself," which he first published in 1855, may be the ultimate poetic expression of triumphant individualism. Whitman begins in the following way:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Later in the poem, speaking of other individuals who also populate the planet, Whitman writes:

And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

"I celebrate myself, and sing myself, and what I assume you shall assume," Whitman says. These lines bring to mind my absolute favorite poem title of all time: Tony Hoagland's poem "What Narcissism Means to Me." In celebrating himself and singing his own praises, Whitman assumes that his assumptions about his own life and about life generally will likewise be assumed by everyone else. This privileging of his

own experience as both white and male, and presuming that everyone else experiences the world in the same way he does, expresses the essence of the individualist creed. To be fair, Whitman goes on to understand himself as constituted by his relationships to everyone around him, but he does so while assuming they view the world as he does.

The poet Lucille Clifton makes no such assumption. Born during the Great Depression in upstate New York, Clifton came into the public eye when Langston Hughes included some of her poems in his 1966 anthology *The Poetry of the Negro*. She went on to become one of our nation's most prolific and well-known poets. She was twice a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and she served as a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

In one of her best-known poems, Clifton invokes Whitman's celebration of himself. Instead of assuming the people around her view the world as she does, however, she recognizes that they view it differently. She writes:

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?

As an African-American woman whose grandparents were enslaved people, Clifton realizes that she can't model herself after the predominantly white men whose lives were viewed as successful. She is both nonwhite and woman, she says. She was born in Babylon — a reference to the story in the Hebrew Bible of the people of Israel held captive and enslaved in the land of Egypt. Looking around, Clifton says, I didn't see anyone who could serve as a model for who I could be, so I decided to be myself — to shape what I have into a kind of life. Won't you celebrate with me, she asks?

In Edward Hirsch's volume titled *The Heart of American Poetry*, which a group of us are working our way through on Wednesday mornings at 10 AM, he makes the following observation. "Clifton aligns herself with Whitman's great claim," he says, "but she is also slyly suggesting that he is making a certain universalist presumption, which is that he can speak for all of us, that we can accept what he accepts, that one can stand for all. As an outsider, a newcomer with a starkly different pedigree, Clifton problematizes that idea. Is what she shall assume at all what you shall assume?"

The obvious answer to this question is no. There is no common assumption — no universalist presumption. Even so, Clifton goes on to say, speaking of her self-made life, "i made it up / here on this bridge between / starshine and clay."

The essential point I take Clifton to be making is that our identity as individuals cannot be assumed based on our personal characteristics. Rather, our identity must be constructed. We need to build a bridge between clay and starshine — between our

physical beings and our spiritual aspirations. “I made it up,” she says of her identity. Since other people must do the same, our relationships cannot be based on assumptions about what we have in common. Rather, our relationships are based on what we agree to do together. “Come celebrate with me,” she says.

In his commentary on Clifton’s poem, Edward Hirsch points out that the word celebrate derives from a Latin word meaning crowded or populous. Clifton’s invitation to celebrate with her emerges from her understanding that her life is one life among many. By inviting others to celebrate with her, she is both acknowledging their presence and also their difference, which requires a bridge to span. The universalist element in human experience is not the assumption that we are all alike in some way, but rather the commitment to engage in certain kinds of experiences together.

The Italian philosopher and political activist Lorenzo Marsili echoes this sentiment in a recent article in *Noema Magazine* titled “From the Age of Empires to the Age of Humanity.” He observes that our world today is fragmenting. The great powers that have arisen since 1945 are geographically large and politically diverse, but they are not cosmopolitan — not citizens of the world in the traditional sense. For the most part, they have turned away from any underlying commitment to universal principles and claim instead only the validity of their own individualist narratives.

This problem has emerged in part, Marsili says, because the nations of the West have assumed that Western values and principles would inevitably become the standard for all political and economic relationships. “I celebrate myself,” Western nations have said in effect, rather than, “Come, let’s celebrate together.” The assumption that Western self-identity would come to be widely shared among other nations has turned out not to be valid. In the wake of this realization, Marsili says, we need to understand universalism differently. We need to make universalism — construct it — rather than assume its presence.

For his part, Marsili looks to a stanza from the 19th century British Romantic poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, who writes in his poem “Ulysses”:

I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro’
Gleams that untravell’d world whose margin fades
For ever and forever when I move.

“The first line of the poem, Marsili says, “performs a striking reversal. We are used to considering all our experiences and travels as a part of us, incorporating them into what we have become. Tennyson reverses that perspective. It is the traveler who becomes a part of all they have met. The traveler does not subsume the world but is rather subsumed by it.”

Imagine universalism, Marsili concludes, not as a singular all-encompassing worldview, but as a collection of specific principles and practices that emerge and bind

humanity as it agrees on and practices them. He says, “Universals emerge from a process of universalizing, from a coming together of humanity.” In this sense, universalism is not something we believe in common, but rather something we do in common.

The question, both politically for our nation and theologically for Unitarian Universalism, is whether this approach will prove adequate to the task of binding us together. There’s a world of difference between the triumphant individualism of “I celebrate myself” and the practical universalism of “Come, let’s celebrate together.” Here’s the rub: the process of developing a collective identity requires us to give up some of our individual freedom. As Marsili puts it, echoing Tennyson, the traveler does not subsume the world but is rather subsumed by it.

As Unitarian Universalists, our commitment to individual freedom has always been unyielding, often fiercely so. This commitment has enabled us to help break up some of the dominant cultural assumptions about identity and power, which has been a good thing. But Unitarian Universalist congregations have not escaped the damage that untrammelled individualism has done to our culture. The boomerang has come back to strike us as well.

If we are to thrive as a religious tradition in the decades ahead, much less survive, we will need to rethink our commitment to individualism. After all, we are not Unitarian individualists. We are Unitarian Universalists. Come, let us celebrate together.