



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Fifth UU principle versus creeping authoritarianism

Clay Nelson © 8 May 2022

Some have called “This Land Is Your Land” an alternative national anthem in America. It was written and first sung by Woody Guthrie.

Growing up in small-town Oklahoma, Guthrie heard church hymns, outlaw ballads, blues, fiddle tunes and popular music. The Guthries had been fairly prosperous — Woody’s father was a small-time politician and businessman — but the family unravelled during the Depression and his mother’s mental illness. That’s when Woody took to the road to be a street entertainer.

“This Land Is Your Land” wasn’t released by Folkways Records until 1951, but the song was originally written in February 1940, when Woody Guthrie first arrived in New York City from Oklahoma.

Musician, activist and fellow traveller Pete Seeger joined him early on in his travels. Seeger has probably sung “This Land” more than anyone else. Every school kid in 1950s America probably knew it in spite of never hearing it on the radio.

A man happier on the road than at home, Guthrie with Seeger walked, hitched and rode the rails all over the country. He went first to the Gulf Coast, then west to California, where he joined the half-million so-called Okies and Arkies — Dust Bowl refugees migrating in search of better lives. Although Guthrie purposefully threw himself into these travels partly to escape family troubles and his disintegrating first marriage, what he saw and experienced in his travels across the country contributed to his emergence as a social commentator.

He was irritated by Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America”, sung by Kate Smith, which seemed to be endlessly playing on the radio in the late 1930s. So irritated, in fact, that he wrote this song as a retort, at first sarcastically calling it “God Blessed America for Me” before renaming it “This Land Is Your Land”. Guthrie’s original words to the song included this verse:

*There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me.
The sign was painted, said "Private Property."
But on the backside, it didn't say nothing.
This land was made for you and me.*

This verse was recorded in 1944, but not released. In fact, Guthrie's recorded version was more or less lost until a Smithsonian archivist heard the acetate master during a 1997 transfer of the recording to a digital format. Still, it was sung at rallies, around campfires and in progressive schools. It was these populist lyrics that had appealed to the political Left in America.

Guthrie's folk-singing son, Arlo Guthrie, and Pete Seeger have both made a point of singing the more radical verses to "This Land Is Your Land", also reviving another verse that Guthrie had written but never officially recorded. This verse was scribbled on a sheet of loose-leaf paper now in the possession of daughter Nora's Woody Guthrie Archives.

*One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple,
by the relief office I saw my people.
As they stood hungry,
I stood there wondering if God blessed America for me.*

Nora Guthrie suspects why these words may not have been recorded at the 1944 session — and why the "private property" verse that was recorded was not issued. This was the McCarthy era, and US Sen Joseph McCarthy made it dangerous to record this kind of material.

"If my dad had done the recording, I don't think it would have meant anything to him if he was imprisoned, actually," Nora says. "He was quite used to living without and having nights in prison."

Later in his life, Guthrie lost his ability to play guitar and sing, but he continued to write and inspire a younger generation of performers, including Dylan and Springsteen. When Guthrie recorded "This Land Is Your Land", he ended with this verse:

*When the sun comes shining, then I was strolling,
With the wheat fields waving, the dust clouds rolling,
The voice come a-chanting, and the fog was lifting.
This land was made for you and me.*

Arlo told a story to his audience once about being at home one night watching TV and hearing Lady Gaga singing a portion of his dad's song. He couldn't believe how cool that was. He was blown away and immediately called his sister to turn on the TV. Unfortunately, she missed it. In days following he read in papers from around the country that said Lady Gaga had opened her special with a subversive song, to which Arlo told his audience, "If my dad's song is now considered subversive there is no polite way to say this, we are fucked."

I share Woody and Pete's story because I worry about how long globally this land will be our land. Even before the leak this week of the Supreme Court's decision to ignore the 80% of Americans who are pro-choice, I chose my topic for this morning. I was not shocked by the decision to overthrow Roe. I knew all three of Trump's nominees to the court lied to Congress about accepting Roe as the undisputed law of the land. Turns out this land in reality, is their land. Not ours.

It is an egregious example of creeping authoritarianism devastating the planet no less than the pandemic is. In fact, Covid is the kind of crisis Churchill said the elite should never let go to waste. Government responses around the world to the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the global democratic decline. Repressive regimes and populist leaders worked to reduce transparency, promote false or misleading information, and crack down on the sharing of unfavourable data or critical views. Many of those who voiced objections to their government's handling of the pandemic faced harassment or criminal charges. Lockdowns were sometimes excessive, politicised, or brutally enforced by security agencies. And anti-democratic leaders worldwide used the pandemic as cover to weaken the political opposition and consolidate power.

Freedom House, that monitors how democratic a country is, reported that in 2020 only 20% of the global population lived in a totally free country. Sweden and Finland were the most free with a perfect score of 100. We are fortunate to live in a country that followed them with a score of 99. But that was two years of pandemic ago. We were still being kind to each other. We were relieved to have a vaccine available. Closing our borders made sense. Lockdowns at best precipitated black humour on social media and at worst benign acceptance of its necessity. Wearing a mask was not a political statement, just a caring promise to protect others. We took seriously that this land was our land, making it difficult for the elite to claim it as their own. Never

letting a good crisis go to waste, they responded by finding ways to make New Zealand their land again.

They encouraged pandemic fatigue, predicting it would take its toll and it has. There are too many reports of abuse of medical staff, shop staff, bus drivers and even librarians. Fake news and misinformation have abounded. Thanks to authoritarian aggression in Ukraine, low unemployment, supply line interruptions, and greed, inflation is making life more difficult, especially for those on the margins, and is scaring those of means. And finally, the unknown. While new cases of omicron are trending down, new variations are generating fresh waves in other countries. The result is creeping authoritarianism, even here, as the latest polls suggest.

Why do some people find authoritarian leaders appealing? Why do they sometimes secure vast numbers of votes in democratic countries?

Authoritarian leaders tend to corrupt the political system, rig the courts, assail the free press, jail their opponents, constrain or close universities, and lie brazenly to their citizens. They pit social groups against one another, depicting immigrants as interlopers and exploiters. It's hard to imagine what any fully rational voter could see in such a leader. Why would anyone rationally choose to vote for someone like that? At the cost of our collective rights and freedoms, and of our cohesion as a society?

One answer would be to say that supporters of authoritarians are not in fact making a rational, authentic choice. Either they're being forced to go along with the regime or they are being tricked into it. Authoritarian regimes deploy vast propaganda operations, continually demonising opponents, fanning the flames of prejudice, ginning up fear of outside forces, and warning of the dangerous "enemy within." And unfortunately, propaganda has a way of working.

Another option would be to say that the irrationality comes, at least in part, from within. Maybe there is an authoritarian personality type. Some of us love the freedom and variety we find in democratic societies, with the many different lifestyles they make possible, the many different standpoints and attitudes, the many different cultures that flow into our life together. This group also welcomes positive social change, as taboos are overcome and barriers lifted. A second group feels indifferent to such change and variety, with no strong feelings either way. But a third group finds it psychologically

intolerable. To them, perhaps, it feels like chaos. To them, anything — even tyranny — is preferable to that.

Maybe the fear, in some cases, goes even deeper than that. In *The Brothers Karamazov* the Grand Inquisitor he says he would have had Jesus executed, because Jesus's message of freedom is ruinous. "Nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom." People's terror of personal freedom, intensified by the vision of unfettered choice presented by the media every day, drives them into the arms of an authoritarian?

So far we have some pretty unimpressive "reasons" for signing up: people are being tricked by propaganda, pushed by their own prejudice, or pulled by their fear of disorder, change, and freedom. We're left with two remaining possibilities. One is that the voters in question simply have the facts wrong. If someone genuinely believed that, say, cats were radioactive, that everyone was lying about them being safe, and that only Pat Smith could save us from them, maybe it would be rational—albeit misguided!—to vote for Pat. ("Fear the cat, vote for Pat.")

But here's a more troubling possibility. What if part of the reason is that democracy, at least in its current general incarnation, isn't everything it's cracked up to be? Politicians are often more interested in getting re-elected than in doing what's best for the country; they're often subject to pressure from lobbying groups and from rich donors; and, even at its best, democracy can only deliver compromise solutions to the problems facing society.

Be that true, and given the elite's distrust of the masses, Unitarians must keep this land our land by remaining true to our fifth principle, "we affirm ... the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large." It is more than an affirmation. It is a commitment to resist the forces that give authoritarianism a beachhead to plant their flag on our land. We must protect the rights of everyone they might oppress. We need to stand strong for economic, social, and environmental justice. We must challenge our elected leaders to remain faithful to the oaths they have taken to represent all the people and seek their well-being. We must show kindness and compassion and caring to those who have been frightened and intimidated.

I come from a country considerably less free than when I left it. May the same not be in New Zealand's future. Stop creeping authoritarianism at the border. Our fifth principle is up to the job. Are we?

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

What are you prepared to do stop creeping authoritarianism?