Why We Don't Ban Books. Do We*?*

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

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Banned Books Week, from October 4 through 10 this year, was established in 1984, during the era of the Moral Majority that helped elect President Ronald Reagan and a new age of, so-called, "conservative" politics. But why, even with a conservative majority in control of the White House, Congress, and Senate, would we need an entire week dedicated to protecting free expression through books and other writings? This is still America, isn't it? We don't ban books. Do we? Okay, maybe a few books that we occasionally hear about, but not enough that we must annually raise awareness about the problem. Do we?

According to young adult and children's fiction author, Judy Blume, we do. Blume was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in the world just three years ago yet is also one of the most banned authors in U.S. schools and libraries. In her introduction to *Places I Never Meant to Be*, an anthology of censored writers, Blume explains, "The 70s were a good decade for writers and readers. Many of us came of age during those years, writing from our hearts and guts, finding editors and publishers who believed in us, who willingly took risks to help us find our audience. We were free to write about real kids in the real world."[1] But then, "almost overnight," she says, "Following the presidential election of 1980, the censures crawled out of the woodwork, organized and determined. Not only will they decide what their children could read but what all children could read. It was the beginning of the decade that wouldn't go away, that still won't go away almost 20 years later."[2]

But 20 years later then was 2001, a quarter century ago today. Surely, we don't really need a Banned Book Week today, in the 21st century? Do we? The Moral Majority dissolved in the late 80s and its founder, fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell has been dead since 2007.

According to PEN America, a nonprofit founded in New York City in 1922, that's part of a global movement to protect freedom of expression through literature and human rights advocacy, there have been 11,982 instances of book bans in the 2025-2026 school year.[3] PEN's website reports, "This year saw a record number of unique titles banned — 7,370 titles — impacting the creative works of over 4,000 authors, illustrators and translators. Over 4,500 of these were titles not previously recorded in PEN America's *Index of School Book Bans*, the most new titles added to the index in a single year, illustrating the continued expansion of the book banning crisis."[4]

Crisis is not too strong a word. Between 2021, when PEN first began tracking the numbers, they surged from roughly 2500 book bans, according to the most recent reports out just this month, to over 12,000 today, with the heaviest concentration in Texas and Florida.[5]

You may recall a troubling story much closer to home only a short time ago. In 2022, Kimber Glidden, director of the Boundary County Library in Bonners Ferry, Idaho, quit after just nine

months on the job, citing harassment that made it impossible for her to continue. The controversy began when a parent asked about *Gender Queer*, a book the library didn't own but that Glidden offered to obtain for anyone who wanted it. The parent's outrage grew into accusations that Glidden was grooming children and stocking pornography, and eventually to armed residents filling library board meetings. After Glidden and three other employees resigned, the library formalized a process for challenging books but would still not agree to placing controversial books out of sight.

According to many reports on the topic, including a 2023 *Atlantic* article, "red states have passed a wave of new laws restricting how classroom teachers can talk about race, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as measures making it easier for critics to pressure schools to remove books from classrooms and libraries."[6] The good news is that most Americans, according to a recent poll, are overwhelmingly opposed to book banning, regardless of how they feel about these particular social controversies. As one pollster explained, "There is something about this idea of book banning that really makes people stop and say, 'I may be uncomfortable with some of this transitional treatment kids are getting, and I don't know how I feel about pronouns, but I do not want them banning books.'"[7]

That's good news, although it makes the answer to our question, "We don't ban books. Do we?", more complicated to answer. Yes, we do ban books, a lot of books, an increasing number of books, even though most of us, regardless of what side of the issues we're on, are against doing so. That's great! It's a relief. Despite the successes small groups are having in banning books, most Americans, including those on different sides of the issues, still believe in the freedom to write and read and access whatever books we want.

So, let's redirect the question away from Americans themselves and turn them inward, toward those on our side of the issues? Toward liberals. Liberals don't ban books. Do we? The question seems almost oxymoronic; how could we call ourselves liberal if we ban books? Something about the very definition of the word proves that we do not and cannot ban books. If someone bans books, they can't be liberal.

No. Not outright. Liberals don't try to removed titles from libraries and schools or go after librarians who refuse to meet their demands. But if that's all we mean by not banning books, we're not saying much because it presumes banning refers only to books and preventing them from being sold or read. But people can also be banned, and have been throughout history, which is why the root of banishment is "ban." They can be banned not only by being sent away, but being silenced through imprisonment, house arrest as Galileo was, or, as is more often the case today, by demonizing and discrediting them on social media through false *ad hominem* claims. And, yes, those on our side of the issues, whether we can consider them liberal or not, do ban books in this indirect manner. Preventing freedom of thought and speech by any means is the opposite of the very definition of what it means to be liberal.

We'll come back to this but, first, another interesting etymology lesson. The word "ban" comes from a Proto-Indo-European word meaning "to speak," and to do so publicly and with authority. Overtime, it came to be associated with that authority to speak, by making official proclamations, for example. Then it came to mean the authority to forbid speech. And, finally, to banish those who spoke publicly about forbidden things. Isn't that interesting, Ban took a complete turn, from meaning speaking publicly to being forbidden to speak publicly; from public announcements to public prohibitions—a word rooted in the act of speaking eventually came to signify the authority to silence.

I hope this is not what happens to the meaning of the word liberal, the root of which means freedom; that it should come to mean the opposite of freedom, particularly the freedom to speak publicly, which I fear is precisely what's happening. In recent years those who have overtaken the Unitarian Universalist Association, the headquarters of our once liberal religion, have preferred to refer to ours as a "liberating" rather than "liberal" religion. They sound related, but they are not. Being liberal is about ascribing to certain values and principles that guide our behavior and the means by which we achieve freedom. Those who call themselves liberators, on the other hand, have largely been authoritarian invaders who use the term to justify taking over the lands and societies and cultures of others, including what they can and can't publicly say.

Remember, it was the international labor movement, made up of mostly working-class young people who established communist Russia and China. Upon their success, the Bolshevik's in Russia immediately went after independent thinkers, professors, writers, and scientists—those they called the *intelligentsia*—and systematically arrested, imprisoned, and executed many of them, while packing others onto cargo vessels called "Philosophers Ships" that permanently removed the country's brightest minds. Likewise, during its "Cultural Revolution," the Chinese Communist Party radicalized its youth, the "Red Guard," to systematically terrorize, silence, and execute the country's intellectual elite. In both cases, these were the liberators, the revolutionaries acting on behalf of ordinary people.

We ought to also remember that in the U.S. the Republicans were the original liberals, born out of a passion for individual freedom that made abolishing slavery their first priority. It was formed in 1854 by anti-slavery northerners. Their core slogan in 1856, when their party's first Presidential candidate, John C. Fremont, was running, was, "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, Free Men." Unlike today's GOP, they favored a strong federal government that could fund infrastructure, land grants, and other social programs, and were major supporters of those constitutional amendments, the 13th, 14th, and 15th, that were established to protect freed African Americans. Heck, they even favored federal power over state rights. Our church's very first minister, Edwin Wheelock, who came to Spokane in 1888 with a bounty on his head for speaking favorably of abolition in Virginia, not only fought against slavery in the Civil War, and afterward started two Freedman schools responsible for educating over 20,000 former slaves, but he was also the founder of the Texas Republican Party.

It wasn't unusual for Republicans to be fiscally conservative and socially liberal way up into the 1960s, before the party largely turned against the Civil Rights movement. In fact, many Unitarians at the time were Republicans. One history says it was 34 percent.[8] According to a Trinity College study of Unitarian Universalists in the U.S., 18 percent of us were still Republicans in 1990, compared to only 6 percent in 2008. Between those same years, Independents among us dropped from 37 percent to 30 percent. So it's not like we were always or have long been mostly made up of Democrats.

The point is, things are always changing and are still changing right now. The Democrats were once the pro-slavery party in this country. So even if our more recent past suggests there's no way liberals, let alone Unitarians, would ever ban books, it's not something we can take for granted. In twenty years from now it could be the GOP that will be fighting most to protect free expression in all its forms, while democrats become further obsessed with attempting to fashion a more just world simply by purifying the speech of others.

Most of us are familiar with Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, about a future in which all books are banned and those whose job it is to burn them are called, "firemen." But, as Bradbury writes, "It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick."[9] The future Bradbury foresaw as far back as 1951 banned books because there were so many special interest and identity groups, that all books were sure to offend somebody. So, they purged all of them, keeping only comic books and pornography. As Bradbury says, "Don't step on the toes of dog-lovers, cat-lovers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico."[10]

Yes, even Unitarians made his list, which I think was incredibly prescient of Bradbury, who was himself a Unitarian. Today the UU Association has become obsessed with issues of identity and has prioritized the identities of some, particularly those who have been historically marginalized, over those of others. This is understandable, but the way they are going about it is illiberal. Instead of maintaining our devotion to freedom of expression, the UU Association, or those who have captured it, are doing so by publicly attacking and banishing those who disagree with their approach—by which I mean attempting to use social media and other mechanisms to ruin their reputations and careers. Such character assassination and the ruin of livelihoods is meant to have a chilling effect on anyone who dares to challenge them.

As you know, when I challenged them by, as any good Unitarian would, writing a book about my concerns in 2019, I was immediately condemned, and persistently attacked for a full year, until I was eventually disfellowshipped from the professional order of Unitarian Universalist ministers. I was banned from its General Assembly within hours of giving my book away for free, condemned as racist, homo- and transphobic, ableist, and classist by hundreds of ministers within 24 hours of

handing it out, publicly censured a month later, and disfellowshipped a year later—without anyone, to this day, citing a sentence from my book corroborating any of these ridiculous *ad hominin* claims. After this infamous General Assembly, one minister went back to his congregation and bragged about taking up armloads of my books, not one of which he had read, and immediately throwing them into the trash.

We don't ban books. Do we? The answer, despite all I have said, is still, "No. We don't." Conservatives might. Extremists might. Republicans and Democrats might. Americans might. Liberators might. Unitarian Universalists might. But liberals? No way! Liberals can't ban books or condemn their authors because just as soon as they do they prove they aren't liberals. I don't consider those who throw them in trash cans, whether they've read them or not, to be either Unitarians or liberals. As the great Unitarian minister, John Dietrich said in his 1926 sermon, "Who Are These Unitarians?", "each Unitarian society guarantees its minister absolute freedom of thought and expression … The very foundation stone of the Unitarian faith is the belief that truth should be taken as authority and not authority as truth."[11]

More importantly, in another 1926 sermon, "What is a Liberal?", Dietrich said, "The liberal above all else must be both the exponent and the champion of the ideal of freedom, demanding freedom of expression for oneself and help guarantee it for others. It is this idea of freedom that others, no matter how much they may differ from us in opinion and ways of life, are nevertheless entitled to every liberty, which has ever constituted the noblest attribute of the liberal spirit."[12] This is why he also said liberalism requires courage, that, "Only a brave person will dare in the face of all obstacles to insist upon unqualified freedom both for oneself and for others."[13]

Dietrich is far from alone in this summation. For example, in his 1945 book, *A History of Unitarianism*, Unitarian minister and historian, Rev. Earl Morse Wilbur wrote that our religion is defined by the "fundamental *principles* of freedom, reason and tolerance."[14] As an Enlightenment religion, from which liberalism sprang, I consider these the principles of liberalism in general. Liberals are devoted to every person's freedom to think, speak, write, read, and to go about the world as an equal among others; to the freedom to reason for themselves without having creeds and decrees forced upon them, nor punished for expressing their own; and, where we disagree with one another, to know that our differences shall be tolerated and we may continue to participate in community and the full benefits of society, including writing books that others will disagree with.

That's why we don't ban books. Because we are Unitarians and Unitarians are supposed to be liberal. It may be possible for others to do so, but not for us, not if we are truly who we say we are.

Do we ban books? As a society, sadly, yes, and increasingly so, which ought to deeply trouble us. As Unitarians? Not really, but it's happening in our religion anyway because our Unitarian principles have been abandoned by the den of thieves who have captured the UU Association; and are now slipping a fast one on by subtly swapping "liberation" for "liberal." But those of us who are truly

liberal, devoted to freedom, reason, and tolerance, noticed this sleight-of-hand right away. We noticed it because we don't ban books.

And, as liberals the answer is unequivocal. Of course, we don't ban books because, by definition, we cannot ban books and be liberal.

But, again, there are many ways to ban books; creating a chilling effect by condemning anyone who says certain things we disagree with, preempting the publication of books by threatening publishers, going on social media to make false *ad hominem* claims about the character of their authors; controlling through fear and intimidation which books show up in our schools and public libraries, and even in our commercial bookstores, or, simply by not standing up for the free speech of others, no matter how much we disagree with them.

So, yes, sadly many Americans, citizens of our, so-called, free country, do ban books. So do some Republicans and Democrats. And so do many Unitarian Universalists. But liberals. No way. Liberals, because of the values we hold, simply cannot. Freedom. Reason. Tolerance. This is why we don't ban books. Do we.

[1] Blume, Jud, editor, *Places I Never Meant to Be*, Alladin Paperbacks, New York, NY, 2001. p. 4

[2] Ibid. p. 5.

[3] Banned Books Week 2026 - PEN America

[4] Ibid.

[5] Florida and Texas lead record 12,000 school book bans, PEN America report finds

[6] Brownstein, Ronald, "The Book-Ban Debate Has Finally Reached a Turning Point," *Atlantic*, May 10, 2023.

[7] Ibid.

[8] https://www.uula.org/burr1?utm

[9] Bradbury, Ray, *Fahrenheit 451*, Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, New York, NY, 1951, 2013, p. 55.

[10] Ibid., p. 54.

[11] Dietrich, John H., *Who Are These Unitarians?* First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, October 19, 1926.

[12] Dietrich, John H., *What is a Liberal?* First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, September 12, 1926.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Morse, Earl Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1945, p. 208.