

Who's the Decider?

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Contemporary Social Commentary

From Frances Moore Lappe *Democracy's Edge*

Today, the most critical and perhaps the only real division we have to worry about is that between those who believe in democracy and those who do not. People in the latter category are willing to put ends over means, violating core democratic principles of honest dialogue, basic fairness, mutual respect, inclusivity, and reciprocal responsibilities in pursuit of an ultimate goal. Anti-democrats here and abroad include those willing to demonize opponents and even to kill innocent people in pursuit of political power, an idealized future, or a superior afterlife....

As a young woman, one day I had an epiphany: the world's problems of poverty, escalating violence, relentlessly concentrating wealth aren't the real crisis. They are all solvable. In most cases, the solutions are widely known. The crisis is our feeling of powerlessness to address them. And this is true because we've blinded ourselves to the most powerful tool we have. That tool is democracy.

Now, if you're like most Americans, the very word "democracy" is a yawn; it's boring, wrapped in duty or perhaps hypocrisy. You've learned to see democracy not as alive and fluid but as dead and rigid.... Think back to your middle school classroom? What did you learn about democracy? I learned that it was secret ballots, multiple parties, countervailing powers. If these structures are in place, *viola!* Democracy! Such lessons suppose that democracy is what we already *have*, certainly not something we *do*....

It is also likely that for many Americans these days, democracy reeks of weakness—something "good" and "just" but not necessarily strong. Especially today when our government defines our fight against terror as a "permanent war," democracy may hardly seem up to the task. Some may doubt that democracy could ever be tough enough to win out against extremism rising around the globe.... But to me, this perception of democracy is the central and most tragic error of our time.

Living Democracy respects and builds our capacities to create community, not just to consume things. It is an uplifting, inclusive vision that calls for the best in us and justifies our devotion, including a willingness to sacrifice. I believe that bringing

democracy to life may be the only path to a society robust and resilient enough to resist extremism of all stripes.

Democracy is powerful yet it is also fragile. As Judge William Hastie once observed, Democracy can "easily be lost but is never fully won."

From David C. Korten, *The Great Turning*

Perhaps the most sobering, but essential, lesson of the ancient Athenian experiment with democracy is its uniqueness, limited scale, and relatively short tenure. By the most generous definition, Athenian democracy, with all its serious flaws, lasted only 250 years.... At its peak, the population of the peninsula of Attica, which defined the boundaries of Athens as a city-state, was about 315,000 persons. Of those, 43,000 were enfranchised as citizens and 150,000 were slaves. Athenian democracy was definitely limited, but still, it was something quite remarkable.

Consider the stunning implications. With the possible exception of Egypt's golden age, Western historians take no note of any comparable group of people enjoying equivalent political rights and freedom during the nearly 3,000 year period between the fall of the early Aegean Goddess civilization and the birth of the United States in 1776. Other examples are found primarily among relatively small tribes of indigenous peoples.

Freedom and democracy are not divine gifts. They are earned and maintained by a vigilant, mindful and mature citizenry through sustained struggle, and once lost they are not easily regained. Imperial ambition is almost certainly their undoing.... Athenian democracy ultimately became the victim of its own hubris. Reaching out to dominate its neighbors through military force, Athens provoked a war with Sparta that ended in its defeat in 404 B.C. This is a sobering lesson for our own time.

Reflections

For fans of Wisconsin college basketball, this has been a very satisfying year with the Badger men winning 28 of 32 games thus far and finishing alone at the top of the Big Ten—their best record in over half a century. Whatever the outcome of the Big Ten Tournament this afternoon, or the NCAA playoffs that follow, it has been a remarkable ride for a team

that boasts many good players, but not one that could be called a truly great player.

Which is why sportswriter Mike Lucas described the Badgers as a “democracy” in his column last week. No single individual carries the team. Players recognize that theirs must be a truly collective effort, and they unselfishly look for the teammate in the right position, or with the “hot hand,” so that the team as a whole will succeed.

This allusion to democracy in the context of college basketball got me to thinking. Is this *really* what the word means, what the principle stands for? Sort of. I think it is true that a healthy democracy requires players—or citizens—who are able to keep their individual egos in check, who are committed not just to personal achievement but to the “greater good,” and who can work collaboratively, knowing that it’s just as important to be able to pass the ball as to shoot it well.

At this point, though, the analogy begins to break down, for the dozen or so young men who have dominated the Kohl Center all winter are not autonomous agents and do not play by majority rule. Although their teamwork is exceptional, the Badgers owe their success to a coach who requires that each player accept without qualification a “system” and a strategy that he imposes. The Badgers win because they are all willing to submit to Bo Ryan’s ultimate authority and function as a highly disciplined unit. Opinions at variance with Coach Ryan’s are unlikely to be entertained. In the world of Badger basketball, Bo is the “decider.”

It concerns me when an important principle like this is treated glibly because at the present moment American democracy is facing a real test of its mettle. Piece by piece, the system that generations of lawmakers developed is being dismantled with scarcely a murmur from a largely acquiescent public. People aren’t paying sufficient attention—a requirement of all healthy democracies—either because they are too busy or have become deeply disillusioned about the democratic idea itself. Many regard democracy as a rather weak, cumbersome, ineffective mechanism for managing the public’s affairs—a chaos of competing interests incapable of responding effectively to the dire threats that surround us.

Evidence of people’s disinterest in and lack of knowledge about our system of government isn’t hard to find. A succession of opinion polls have revealed that a majority of Americans are unable to name a single branch of government—not legisla-

tive, not judicial, not executive. Nor can a majority describe the Bill of Rights, which helps explain why the Patriot Act was so easily swallowed by most Americans. More than two-thirds do not know the substance of that landmark Supreme Court case, *Roe v. Wade*—perhaps the most polarizing judicial decision of the last 40 years.

Nearly half of all adult Americans do not know that states have two senators, and three quarters do not know the length of a senate term. More than 50 percent of Americans cannot name their congressman; 40 percent cannot name *either* of their senators.

Louis Menand points out that people do not *think* politically either. If a pollster asks people whether they favor spending more on welfare, most say no; if you ask the same citizens whether they favor spending more on assistance to the poor, most say yes. Indeed, the average American is probably more familiar with the rules governing the reality-TV show “Survivor,” than those that make our democracy work.

What explains this lack of interest and unwillingness to pay attention to something this important? Lappe blames the typical junior high civics class, which convinced us that politics is really pretty boring. Except during highly-charged elections, we’d rather watch re-runs of *Seinfeld* than CNN or C-Span.

Other factors are at work as well: The hypocrisy of prominent politicians like Eliot Spitzer and Larry Craig; a well-founded suspicion, based on recent election irregularities, that the system is rigged; the belief that American democracy is dominated by wealthy corporate donors who are all too willing to subvert the public interest in order to further a private agenda.

One particularly egregious example of the corrupting influence of money involves the chemical compound MTBE, a gasoline additive that biodegrades very slowly and has contaminated the groundwater in many American cities. The EPA classified MTBE as a human carcinogen in 2000 and ordered that it be phased out over four years. The Bush Administration promptly overruled the Agency and MTBE is still being used in many states—including Wisconsin.

Why would government grant an exemption to a demonstrably hazardous chemical when an alternative (ethanol) is readily available? The answer is money. At the same time the EPA was preparing its phase out plan, the three refining companies that manufacture MTBE were contributing over a half-

million dollars to politicians—including Mr. Bush—who were in a position to preserve the status quo. Clearly, it was money well spent.

Such stories are no longer exceptional but have become rather commonplace—a similar one appeared in the paper just the other day—which has contributed to a growing cynicism about and alienation from public affairs.

Democracy is also seriously affected, as Louis Menand alluded, when citizens are unable to “think” politically. We have been conditioned to respond viscerally to terms like “welfare,” “socialized medicine,” “tax and spend,” “soft on crime.” Voters today do not hold *perspectives* so much as they harbor *prejudices*—irrational, contradictory beliefs that prevent them from voting in their own and the country’s best interest. Indeed, thanks to the slick manner in which issues and candidates are presented by professional marketing firms, voters are swayed more by sound bites and patriotic lapel pins than well-conceived policy statements.

Because much of the American electorate *is* politically illiterate, some have suggested that what this country needs is not more, but less democracy. Economist Bryan Caplan has proposed that all voters take a political and economic competency test. Everyone would still have a vote, but those who scored high on the test would be rewarded with *extra* ballots.

Proposals of this kind are nothing new. The Founding Fathers, too, mistrusted the judgment of the average citizen and sought to dilute their power. No legislation could be passed without the approval of the Senate—originally a carefully selected “elite.” The government of Ancient Athens, often extolled as the birthplace of democracy, had similar safeguards. “Early implementers of (Greek) democracy,” Peter Green writes,

while giving the garlic-chewing multitude the political right to vote, carefully left the old social structure of family and ancient, aristocratic clans untouched . . . such that a limited group of well-placed families consistently played a leading role in Athens’ civic and political life.

In the absence of an active, well-informed civic culture, a powerful aristocracy has already arisen within our own democratic system. Today it is almost impossible to attain high or even mid-level office without the backing of an economic elite. As political economist Wayne O’Leary notes, candidates for president, the Senate and most governor-

ships are now judged solely by the amount of money they are able to raise. If aspirants do not reach a certain fund-raising threshold, they tend to be ignored on the debate platform and absent from news reports. No matter how compelling or original a candidate’s message, it’s the money that matters, and a good deal of that money, as we know, comes from powerful vested interests.

Democracy, as both David Korten and Frances Moore Lappe remind us, can be a powerful instrument for solving our most pressing problems: inequality, social unrest, racial and ethnic oppression and climate change. Powerful, yes, but democracy is also very fragile. Our own system—largely the creation of a few wise and worldly men in powdered wigs—is now 225 years old and almost as old as Athenian democracy at the time of its collapse in the late 5th century B.C.

If we hope to see American democracy last beyond our children’s lifetimes, we’re all going to have to become more mindful, more vigilant, more engaged. The system we profess to love is being steadily subverted, as evidenced by the imperious behavior of the current administration.

During his time in office, President Bush has accomplished the following:

- Made numerous high-level appointments against the express wishes of Congress. John Bolton’s selection as U.S. representative to the U.N. is but one example.
- Attached so-called “signing statements” to bills passed by Congress that violate their intent and undermine federal separation of powers. Mr. Bush has produced 130 signing statements that directly challenge 750 federal laws—far more than any previous president.
- The White House has repeatedly refused to spend lawfully appropriated monies when the President disagreed with their purpose.
- The Executive has routinely sabotaged the work of regulatory agencies like the EPA, OSHA and the FDA at the bidding of corporate clients and to the detriment of the public’s health and safety.
- Finally, in his role as commander-in-chief, the president has claimed virtually unlimited

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authority to pursue a global war on terror. His advisors declare that the president will engage the enemy however he pleases—at home or abroad—without regard to what other branches of government have said.

Now, *separately* each of these items might not mean much, but put them *together* and they reveal a deeply troubling pattern.

According to David Cole, a Georgetown law professor, the foregoing suggests that Mr. Bush is quite prepared to destroy the Constitution in order to

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save the country from terrorism, forgetting that the Constitution *is* the country—it is what defines us as a nation.

For Unitarian Universalists, the manner in which human beings govern their communities and manage their collective life is a matter not just of political but of

spiritual import. Our Fifth Principle encourages us to use the democratic process within our congregations *and* to do what we can to promote and strengthen democracy in society at large. Why? Because, like Frances Moore Lappe we believe it is a powerful, effective means for promoting the common good but also because democracy affords a kind of fulfillment that just isn't available in an authoritarian or corporate-dominated society.

The Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen has argued that full satisfaction of a human being's material needs is not enough. People do not live by bread and iPod's alone, and unless society affords citizens the opportunity to express themselves creatively, candidly, cooperatively, and allows them to have a hand in determining their own destiny, it doesn't measure up.

"Even a very rich person who is prevented from speaking freely or from participating in public debates and decisions," Sen writes, "*is deprived* of something that she has reason to value."

What, then, is our commission? As card-carrying Unitarian Universalists, how do we go about strengthening democracy here and in society at

large? Voting and other forms of political participation are important, and Madisonians are hardly slouches in this respect. But democracy is also a set of attitudes that need to be present if the system is to function as it should. What I want to emphasize in closing, then, is individual cultivation of the democratic "spirit."

Frances Moore Lappe spoke of an "uplifting, inclusive vision that calls forth the best in us and ... includes a willingness to sacrifice." That's a good beginning. But there's more to it than that. Democracy also requires humility—it is the spirit that "is not too sure it is right;" that is willing, as Kevin Mattson says, "to entertain ideas that we might have disagreed with at first." The arrogance and inflexibility exhibited by our nation's leaders these past few years is clearly not in keeping with the democratic spirit.

Citizens who are self-critical, reflective, and capable of broad rather than narrow sympathies also serve to strengthen a democracy, Mattson writes. There's nothing wrong with partisanship and political passion, but too much passion creates polarization and jeopardizes the democratic spirit. In a viable democracy, dispassion is as important as passion.

Those junior high textbooks told us all about the structures and operational principles common to democratic systems, but they probably neglected to say that without the proper sensibility or spirit, the desired outcome won't be achieved. Many nations and many organizations proudly display the *trappings* of democracy, but behind the façade what we often find—in Russian, in Pakistan, at corporate stockholder meetings—is just one more autocracy.

Here at First Unitarian Society we strive for transparency, inclusiveness, widespread participation, flexibility and freedom of expression—and although the spirit of democracy isn't always perfectly served, most of the time we do pretty well. On previous occasions I've described this faith community as a "laboratory of democracy" because I believe that here we have the opportunity to develop abilities that can bring democracy back to life in America at large. Our Fifth Principle is an especially important one because, as Frances Moore Lappe says, "democracy *is* the most powerful tool we have," one we simply cannot afford to lose.