

“The Tao of Democracy: Hope for a Sustainable Future”

A Sermon by the Rev. Makanah Elizabeth Morriss

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If I was to ask you what positive images come to your mind when I say “democracy,” I would bet that words like “voting,” “free elections,” “freedom of speech,” “representative government” might come to mind.

If I was to ask you what negative connotations come to mind, the list might include “self-serving politicians,” “big money interest groups,” “spin doctors,” “misuse of power.”

The first list describes the goals, the ideals, the positive potential of democracy. The second list describes how the implementation of democratic practices can get off base, off the mark.

Now, I want to admit up front and directly that I deeply believe in democracy. I am proud of the democratic foundation upon which our nation is built. This pride nurtures my sense of patriotism even when events or political decisions or misuse of political processes cause me to feel less than proud of actions taken by my country.

As I have mentioned at other times, I grew up in a family which cherished the concept and foundational structures of democracy. My older brother, Kit, loved American history and the political process and thus when my twin sister and I were about 6 years old and Kit was 13, he instituted a two-tiered family council system for our family -- a “Junior Family Council” comprised of himself and my sister and I and a “Senior Family Council” comprised of himself and my parents. (I should have recognized a certain political power issue here with his being the only family member on both family council, but I did not.)

The rationale for the two family councils was that my father commuted into New York City from our home in Connecticut each day and did not arrive home at night until after my sister and I had gone to bed. So Kit’s idea was that he could convene the Junior Family Council and then take issues, concerns, questions to the Senior Family Council when my father arrived home.

Eventually, of course, we got old enough to do away with the Junior Council and we all were members of the Family Council. It was here that I learned Roberts’ Rules of Order and how these rules used carefully actually help everyone’s voice be heard. I also learned of the use of subcommittees charged with studying specific issues.

A story I believe I have shared before illustrates this well. At one point I became very enamored of the idea of having a pet baby skunk and thus brought this to the Family Council. My father, being wise in the ways of democratic process, affirmed my interest and as he at the time was chair of the Family Council (the chairpersonship did rotate among all of us) designated me as a one-person Skunk Study Committee charged with researching all aspects related to skunks as pets.

I was thrilled and took my duty very seriously. I got a small notebook and made many notes from the Encyclopedia and one or two other sources until I got bored with the project and as with many initiatives the skunk proposal died in committee.

And yet father had taught me some very important and affirming things by the process he used. He had instilled in me the understanding that democracy has the space for ideas from every citizen, that these ideas need to be looked at carefully and from multiple perspectives, and then a decision needs to be made as to whether or not to take these ideas further.

My father, himself, was active in civic affairs in our small town, being on many town boards and study committees, and thus I grew up feeling that democracy was very accessible and definitely something our family “did.”

As the years have gone by, as I have lived in very different parts of the country which had very different political profiles, I have appropriately lost any naivete I have about the political process. However, I have never wavered in my belief that democracy, “government by the people,” at its best offers hope for an ever evolving better future for our world if and this is a very important “if” I and others as citizens do our part, offer our commitment to a democratic process which itself always needs to be evolving and changing.

That’s why I like the reading on “commitment” I just shared. When democracy is done well, everything is very vivid and clear and you can taste in the vegetables, the fruits, that have been grown from it, that the soil has been cared for. Our commitment to democracy invites us to be more generous and to open our hearts and requires us not be afraid of life. And in finding the avenues for ever unfolding and empowering democracy, our lives can be married to joy – the joy of healthy communities.

This coming Tuesday is “election day,” not big elections this year and still there are contests and issues related to our lives as residents of Cheyenne and of Wyoming that we are being asked to consider.

Election day is a day which needs to matter to every one of us. Many of us may feel a bit skeptical or jaded and believe that our vote does not count. One could use statistics and formulas and maybe prove that one vote does not usually matter in the outcome of an issue (although our last Presidential election probably shifted this belief a bit). But the act of voting does count, does matter, and is one of the most profound acts we make on behalf of ourselves and others.

So when I found a book entitled *The Tao of Democracy: Using Co-Intelligence to Create a World that Works for All* by Tom Atlee I was intrigued. Atlee is a longtime social activist, founder of the Co-Intelligence Institute. He has written and spoken for twenty years on politics, democracy and cultural transformation. He has two resource-packed websites – *co-intelligence.org* and *democracyinnovations.org* used by thousands of people every month.

Atlee begins his book by explaining that he chose the title *The Tao of Democracy* because Lao-Tzu, the founder of Taoism, is famous for his insistence then when leaders lead well, people feel that they did it themselves, and that it happened naturally. The centering quote found at the top of your order of service this morning shares Atlee’s basic premise, “Democracy is, in the end, about creating processes that allow people to empower themselves, not about Great Leaders saving the people.” His book is all about using innovate methods to increase the capacity of “We the People” to govern ourselves wisely. (Atlee, p. viii)

Democratic innovations are critical at this moment in history if we are to deal effectively with the crisis-generating capacity of our twenty-first century civilization. As Atlee writes, “Collectively, we are creating effects in our world beyond our...ability to comprehend what we are doing, at a speed that surpasses our collective ability to reflect and respond...Our civilization is racing headlong into massive breakdown or breakthrough – or both.” (p. ix)

As Atlee writes, “We need to apply an unprecedented level of collective wisdom to all the challenges we face...We need to focus our full capabilities – heart, mind, soul and gut – on our collective situation. We need to be informed by big-picture sensibilities, aware of our potential for both catastrophe and evolution, for both co-stupidity and collective wisdom. We need methods that can help us deepen and expand our thinking, feeling and dreaming, and we need ways to weave it all together, collaboratively, into a shared future. Co-intelligence is the capacity to do that, individually and collectively.” (p. xii)

Co-intelligence is the ability to generate or evoke creative responses and initiatives that integrate the diverse gifts of all for the benefit of all. (p.3)

Let me share an example of a country, albeit a very small nation, that has made some amazingly different decisions for itself by being more consciously tuned into the voices, needs, and gifts of its people and its setting.

“The isolated Kingdom of Bhutan, which is situated between China and India, gained some notice several years ago by declaring its official standard of success as “Gross National Happiness” instead of the traditional Gross National Product used by most nations.

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley explained this concept in a speech to the United Nations a year ago. He said:

“My country continues to be guided by our goal of promoting “Gross National Happiness” as opposed to simply targeting the enhancement of Gross National Product as the end of development. We believe that it is the responsibility of the government to create an enabling environment within which every citizen would have a reasonable opportunity to find happiness.

Toward this, all our development strategies must subscribe to strengthening of the four pillars of Gross National Happiness, which are –

- 1) ensuring equitable and sustainable socio-economic development;
- 2) conservation of our fragile mountain ecology;
- 3) promotion of basic human values and culture; and
- 4) Strengthening of good governance.” (p.91)

I'll have to admit this sounds pretty good to me.

Bhutan is very serious about its commitments. When approached by commercial interests wishing to purchase lumber from Bhutan's beloved forests, the government declined. To further protect forest ecosystems, they are developing solar power as an alternative to wood fuel. They decided to forbid commercial mountain climbing to protect the spiritual integrity of their mountains, which have been made a national park. Only a few thousand tourists are allowed each year, mostly seekers of enlightenment and bird watchers.

Inspired by its Buddhist roots, Bhutan sees happiness as the Middle Way between tradition and modernization. (p.92)

What strikes me about this example is that it seems to model the balance and harmony that can be achieved when co-intelligence is tapped.

Co-intelligence is a concept and an idea that is new to most of us and yet we, especially those of us on this liberal and life-affirming religious path, are standing at the brink of this next evolutionary leap.

Tom Atlee suggests that this “co-intelligence” can be seen to manifest in several different ways.

First, it is more than brains and logic. Co-intelligence is multi-modal intelligence realizing that there are many ways to learn, know and engage with the world. Our bodies, minds, hearts and spirits include a wide spectrum of intelligences – emotional, analytic, intuitive, kinesthetic, narrative, moral, and so forth which need to be tapped.

Second, it is collaborative in nature. Effective intelligence for our era must involve more than learning how to control and predict things. Collaborative intelligence means finding and working with all the available allies and cooperative forces around us. We need to be looking for energies, both existing and also potential, with which we can fruitfully align and some of these allies or energies are to be found within the heart of seeming adversaries and deep within the problems we face. (p. 6)

Third, intelligence for this century must be far more than individual. It must become “collective intelligence,”

the intelligence we generate through our respectful interactions and our social structures and cultures. Inclusiveness and the creative use of diversity are two pivotal elements if this is to be achieved.

Fourth, intelligence now needs to reach far beyond the obvious. Co-intelligence manifests as “wisdom” – the ability to see the “big picture,” inviting us to act with greater understanding to affirm the life and development of all involved. Wisdom is heart and mind working together for the good of all. Wisdom fosters wonder, humility, compassion and humor. (p. 7)

Fifth, intelligence needs to be able to arise among us and through us, as a result of our kinship in the interconnected family of life. This aspect is often called “resonant intelligence,” because it is a kind of deep understanding that grows stronger as it resonates in empathetic response to the sharing of life stories and life dreams among peoples.

And finally, as citizens of the 21st century, we need to acknowledge and honor the truth that there is more to intelligence than human intelligence. Atlee suggests that “intelligence is a property of the universe and of all that is in – and perhaps beyond it...Universal intelligence is the intrinsic tendency for things to self-organize and co-evolve into more complex, intricately interwoven and mutually compatible forms. Our human intelligence is but one manifestation of that universal dynamic.” (p. 9)

Albert Einstein many, many years ago acknowledged the same truth when he wrote, “The harmony of natural law...reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection.”

Co-intelligence is a capacity which we the people, you and I, can learn how to nurture and tap. It is not some far-fetched concept.

Let me share a true story (from Atlee’s book) entitled “Awakening the Power and Wisdom of a Community.”

Four hundred years ago, the village of Maliwada, India was a thriving agricultural center, producing fruits, vegetables, and wines. In 1975, it had little water, no sanitation, and few crops. Over 2,000 villagers barely eked out a subsistence living. Muslims and Hindus of many different castes lived with centuries of mutual distrust. The villagers knew about their prosperous past, but it seemed long gone and hopeless to recreate.

“Discussion began based on two questions: “What would it take to have prosperity exist again in this village? What can you do to make that happen?”

“Gradually, as ideas began to pour forth through small group dialogue and sharing, perspectives changed. Hindus and Muslims talked together excitedly about how to clean out the ancient well. Brahmins and Untouchables discovered in a joint meeting that all despaired at the lack of medical care for their sick children. They all wanted to create a health clinic in the village. Hope began to creep into their voices and eyes. What had seemed totally impossible suddenly became doable. People organized and tapped resources they had forgotten they had.

“They acquired loans from a bank and received government grants. They built a dam, a brick factory and the clinic. The shared vision of what they wanted for themselves and their community allowed them to go beyond their personal and cultural differences and continued to motivate them. Each success made them stronger, more confident, more self-assured. Today, Mailwada is a prospering village.”

The process used in this story of rural India was developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs in the 1960’s in a collaborative effort with citizens of an urban ghetto on Chicago’s Westside. It is a process with “trans-cultural” potential

as it invites participants to honor, respect, and deeply listen to one another within a safe setting. And with such listening then a community can evoke previously untapped knowledge, vision and collaborative capacities so that local needs can be met reflecting authentic cultural style. (Atlee, p. 23)

This is an approach which at its core honors the democratic ideal of honoring the wisdom and voice of “we the people” but it does not impose a pre-set image or structure onto the community involved. It does not offer the illusionary “one-size fits all” image of democracy that many Western nations seem bent on imposing around the globe. It is a process which invites and includes and trusts the voices of the people.

Dialogue or wisdom circles are an age-old technique that form the cornerstone of such evolving democratic processes. We have used dialogue circles here in our religious community at various time and for various purposes.

Five years ago when this congregation was trying to discern whether or not to take the very large step of buying this wonderful but large church building, we invited folks of all ages into dialogue circles where we asked people to share their thoughts, concerns, feelings, hopes, dreams.

In a dialogue circle each person is given the space to share openly and safely. Others are asked to listen deeply, not to argue, debate, contradict, just to listen. And as each person in the circle shares their perspective, their individual wisdom, new understandings and possibilities emerge and co-intelligence begins to appear.

“Co-intelligence involves stretching our sense of what is needed, what is relevant, and who is involved in any given situation. It involves stretching in the direction of wholeness, interconnectedness and co-creativity.” (p. 32)

The tao of democracy which springs from co-intelligence has as its goal the desirable unfolding of society. Its goal is not limited to solving certain problems or creating the “ideal society” for once and for all but is more profound and cosmically realistic. The tao of democracy realizes that change is the given. Thus the goal is to create structures, processes, attitudes, ways of being which are flexible and able to learn and evolve effectively.

What does this all mean for us, you and I here together this morning, members and friends of this religious community? Well, I think it means we keep on doing many things which this congregation does very well.

We continue to nurture our “resonant intelligence” through our community outreach programs like the Cheyenne Interfaith Hospitality Network and our monthly dinners at the Come Homeless Shelter. With hands-on caring and generous activity, we learn from others – their perspectives, their struggles, ideas for how our community can grow and change to offer more equitable solutions for more folks.

Our community outreach helps us feel and strengthen our connections with others. As we offer the energies of trust, respect and empowerment to our fellow neighbors in Cheyenne – these energies in turn resonant and move out in wider and wider circles.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are committed to the search for truth and know that there are many perspectives to any given problem or situation. We need to find ways to make sure varied viewpoints are given safe space to be heard and that the “bigger picture” vision is invited to emerge from such study and sharing. Especially as next year’s elections approach, there may be ways for our congregation to help sponsor forums and gatherings which invite such diversity.

We need to ask at the local and state levels for new structures such as Citizen Deliberative Councils, time-limited councils made up of just plain citizens representing a cross section of a specific region or issue, to be used when studying or looking at concerns that impact us all. This particular type of study process can insure that the voice of “we the people” is being heard in clearer and more profound ways. Such councils have already been used in Montana and it seems to me that Wyoming might be a perfect setting for such processes.

And we need to take our responsibility as citizens, citizens of Cheyenne, of Wyoming, of the United States and

of Planet Earth seriously. We need to ask profound and “big” questions of ourselves and our leaders as we determine how to vote on various issues – questions which acknowledge that we are all part of a vast interdependent web of existence.

The Tao of democracy, the invitation to accomplish the next evolutionary steps toward co-intelligence, is knocking at our door. We sense that we can choose to become part of an amazing story waiting to unfold before our eyes.

In closing, I invite you to join with me in the responsive reading found on the insert in your order of service:

In the face of growing darkness

We journey together.

In the face of ecological decline

We journey together.

In the face of social upheaval,

We journey together.

In the face of growing uncertainty,

We journey together.

As we search for glimpses of truth

We journey together.

As we search for signs of possibility

We journey together.

As we search for heralds of a new era

We journey together.

As we search for angels of hope

We journey together.

As we build our world out of chaos

We journey together.

As we build our world out of shattered illusions of superiority

We journey together.

As we build our world out of our inadequate institutions

We journey together.

As we build our world out of our unfair sharing of resources,

We journey together.

As we journey together toward a new era of justice,

We journey together.

As the universe unfolds through new levels of meaning

We journey together.

As the universe unfolds through new ways of being

We journey together.

So may it be, my friends. So may it be.