

Civic Saturday
February 23, 2019
“Becoming US” by Erin Kelley

Civic Readings

***Democracy: A Case Study* by David A. Moss.**

American democracy has always been a relentless struggle, both to expand its promise and to protect itself against forces of decay and corruption. It is a remarkable process, to say the least, but *not* an automatic one. It requires constant vigilance. . . . [T]his struggle – at its best – implies productive tension in the nation’s politics: tension, in the form of competing ideas, interests, and institutions, made productive, ultimately by a deep faith in – and a shared commitment to – the nation’s system of democratic self-governance. This is what gives life to American democracy and has sustained it through countless trials.

***Self-Reliance* by Ralph Waldo Emerson.**

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today. — 'Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.' — Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? To be great is to be misunderstood.

Deval Patrick

We are not united around a common religion or even a common language, but around a handful of civic values. At the end of the day, that is what makes us a unique experiment in human history.

Sermon

Becoming “Us”

In our promotions for today’s Civic Saturday, we encouraged you to attend with a friend. Specifically, a friend who you might not always agree with. If you invited someone to come with you today, thank you! And thanks to your friend for accepting the invitation.

Regardless of whether you invited someone, I hope you’ll reach out to that family member or old friend who you find *challenging* to talk about today’s theme: Becoming Us. More specifically, “becoming us” through acknowledging and wrestling with our shared civic values.

The toxicity in our culture right now has divided us to the point where many of (myself included on some days) have not only lost sight, but have lost the ability to focus on what is supposed to unite us.

That is, those deep civic values alluded to in our reading by Deval Patrick that allow “us” to be an “us.” Americans.

We are in desperate need of reflection on those values and conversation about those values. That’s the only way we’ll ever find a sense of civic unity. Notice I said “civic unity” and not “civic agreement.”

Here’s what I mean by that: By a show of hands, how many of you were taught the following – in theory if not always practice – are quintessential American civic values:

LIBERTY
SELF-GOVERNMENT (aka DEMOCRACY)
INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS/CIVIL LIBERTIES
EQUALITY

By another show of hands, how many of you value those values?

Cool. It looks like this group shares a lot of civic values. But, what if I were to ask you to rank those values? What if I were to ask you which is most important and

why? What if I were to pair some of these values and have you pick the *one* you think is most important for America to live up to?

We all just acknowledged we value these values. But, chances are, we prioritize them differently. If we were to dig into those differences, we would start to disagree with each other.

The civic values that make us, us ... are tricky! These values are complex and exist in a state of tension with each other and within us.

This idea of “us” and of “becoming us” – none of this is meant to be easy.

More to the point: That’s not how healthy democracies function.

A healthy democracy is not one where everyone “gets along.” A healthy democracy is not devoid of conflict. A healthy democracy is not civil for the mere sake of civility.

Healthy democracies hold the tension between competing ideas and values. Healthy democracies use conflict to grow; to test themselves and to strive for more. Healthy democracies need disagreement and our democracy, historically, has grown and evolved after periods of conflict.

Of course for this to be true, the conflict needs to be productive, rather than destructive.

The trick to that – or rather our obligation as caring citizens to see that truth into reality – is to never waiver in our commitment of seeing and honoring the humanity of those we disagree with.

That takes hard work, patience, and a willingness to deeply engage others.

I think a useful tool in doing this is rooting our conversations in the history and the very tension that exists between our civic values. That is, rather than diving straight into a policy debate, maybe start with a civic value-based conversation.

Spoiler Alert though! -- Even if you approach things from a civic value-based perspective, you're still going to disagree with that crotchety old Uncle of yours at Thanksgiving or that hipster niece freshly home from her first semester at college.

That's okay, because again agreement isn't necessarily the goal. Seeing the other person's humanity at the end of the disagreement is.

To be clear though, if the other person you are engaging refuses to see your humanity, you move your energy elsewhere. Disengage from that particular outrage loop. Doing so is not only a measure of self-care, it is a measure of civic care.

Sadly, there are those who are more interested in tearing apart our civic fabric than weaving it together. Don't let them exhaust or demoralize you. You do your civic work where it will make a positive impact. Where it will help us see each other as "us."

But please don't be scared away from having challenging conversations about our shared civic values.

Because right now, in our current civic climate, we need people willing to do the work of seeing each other as "us" and not "us and them."

Maybe keep the words of James Baldwin in mind: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

So let's face some of the tensions in our civic values.

One primary tension between values I want us to explore is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, set of conflicting and competing values in America: **LIBERTY & DEMOCRACY**

Huh? What? You thought democracy and liberty were like peanut butter & jelly? Keep in mind most of the world thinks PB&J is a disgusting combination and they won't even try it.

From there, I want to drill down a bit deeper to talk about how this competition between democracy & liberty (these high, foundational philosophies that are rooted in the very beginnings of our history) play out in the everyday world. Namely, in our understanding and choices around: **individualism & the common good**. It's in the exploration of individual & the common good that I think we can explore the magic of "and." That wonderful little conjunction that helps us find the balance between these values.

Lastly, I want to close by talking about **rights & responsibilities**. Because when we have differing ideas about democracy, liberty, individualism, and the common good, we're going to have differing outlooks on our rights & responsibilities.

My hope is that by taking the time to clarify our civic values, and where they are rooted both historically & philosophically, we might start having smarter arguments. Not ending the arguments necessarily, but maybe we can begin mend our civic fabric if first take a step back, find out what's true in our own hearts, risk being misunderstood, and then openly ask others what they value and why.

Basically, to do the work of rediscovering what makes us "us."

Liberty & Democracy

Broadly speaking, democracy is "rule by the people" and liberty is the ability to do as you please.

Liberty is about the ability of the individual to pursue *whatever* with as little (government) interference as possible.

But democracies are based on the concept (*not the execution*) of equality. To ensure that the same essential rights are shared by everyone, laws must be created. So democracies operate based on the rule of law which, in our case, is established by a majority.

We need the rule of law because if every individual pursued liberty at all costs, there would be chaos. On the other hand, if democracies are not kept in check and limited in some way, they will trample on liberty.

Liberty and democracy, while compatible, exist in a permanent state of conflict and tension. (They need the vigilance and faith of the public to work together.)

This tension played out in the earliest days of America's founding. So much so that in 1786 (a year before the Constitution was adopted), George Washington lamented, "I am really mortified beyond expression that in the moment of our Acknowledged Independence we should, by our conduct, verify the predictions of our transatlantic foe, & render ourselves ridiculous & contemptible in the eyes of all of Europe."

I know we put all those Founding Fathers on our money and built monuments to them, but those boys fought, fought ugly, & fought in public. (The LWV is fond of saying "democracy is not a spectator sport." These guys treated it like a contact sport.)

One of the key struggles they faced was how to create an entirely new system of government that empowered the majority enough to get things done while simultaneously limiting it so that the majority could not squash minority rights. (How do we build a government/a society where both democracy & liberty can thrive?)

Here is where I want to acknowledge the democratic system being created was not truly being created for all. The "majorities" and "minorities" as defined by our founders was incredibly limited and skewed by their own privileged backgrounds. As David Moss points out his work, we know majoritarian abuses occurred – the horror of slavery being but one of them.

It's in this environment – one where America had just defeated the world's strongest monarchy & was understandably nervous about creating a government with too strong of a central power --and one where the hypocrisy of "liberty" and "slavery" existed – that James Madison, during the Constitutional Convention in 1787, proposed something called the "federal negative."

Anyone ever heard of that? It's the idea that Congress should have veto power over state laws. Madison and others thought a tyranny of the majority was more likely at the state level (wherever democracy was smallest) and Congress should be able to correct the States when needed.

One of the people who disagreed with this approach was Thomas Jefferson. (Always a “states’ rights” kind of guy, that Jefferson.) He thought the courts should handle any Constitutional disputes concerning state laws.

After a lot of back-and-forth, various versions of the “federal negative,” and open disputes, the “federal negative” was not included in the Constitution. In 1803 the matter was settled with the case *Marbury vs. Madison* where the Supreme Court asserted the power of judicial review over both federal & state legislative acts. (End of the day, Jefferson wins.)

That is just one example of many of how competing values and democratic philosophies shaped the debate and structure of America. (If you want to dig into more examples, I cannot recommend *Democracy: A Case Study* by David A. Moss enough. He’s the author who inspired our first civic reading today and, to a degree, the structure of this sermon.)

The point I’m trying to make is that these competing values -- and the debates, arguments, slightly whiny letters to friends, public feuds, and eventual litigation – led to a better system. Not a perfect one, for sure. But, a better one.

Working through the conflicts and tensions inherent in our democratic values has the potential to make us stronger. With the exception of the Civil War, when our democracy absolutely broke, the conflicts that have arisen in this nation have historically catalyzed us to dig deep, get more engaged, act when needed, and cooperate with each other in the interest of a common good.

Individualism & Common Good

Let’s talk about individualism & the common good because most of us don’t spend our days worried about the vexing nature of democracy & liberty. But we do – whether we always know it or not – make choices related to individualism & the common good.

From Abraham Lincoln’s ability to work his way up from an extreme poverty to become President of the United States to Madam CJ Walker becoming the first

African American female millionaire, we have some fantastic stories of individual success in this country.

Yet “boot strap” stories aren’t terribly accurate. They feel good, but they fail to capture the advantages some groups have had, and continue to have, over others. Still, many of us – especially Hoosiers, even this one – are proud of the individual streak that runs through our shared heritage.

In a world where we can point to any number of persecuted and oppressed groups, I am filled with gratitude to live in a land where women, people of color, immigrants, gay, and trans communities have been able to fight for their individual rights.

Granted, I’m angry these groups have had to fight in the first place and that many are still fighting. But I won’t hide the fact I’m glad we get the chance to fight. There are many places in the world where that is not true.

I’m in awe we live in a nation that produced the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson who, in his 1841 essay *Self-Reliance*, admonishes us to be nonconformist; who warns a “foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” and, later in the essay tells us, above all else, “Trust thyself.”

Emerson tell us: “To believe our own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all [men] – that is genius.” That is how we live out lives of principle.

There is something very validating about that. It’s an exhilarating acknowledgement that my truth matters. That your truth matters. But therein lies the rub for a democracy.

Where does the “common good” fit in if we’re all so focused on being individuals?

As a nation and people we are guided by a Constitution that begins with *We the People* [not, “I the citizen”] and references a common defense ... general Welfare ...

Our beautiful Constitution’s preamble oozes with “commonness.”

No one likes to be common. To be common is to be boring; it's been done before. In a society that promotes and celebrates individuality, "common" isn't much of a compliment. Common isn't amazing... or is it?

In 2009 a little known economic program headquartered on IU's campus in Bloomington, The Workshop on Political Theory, made national headlines. We all woke up one morning, as did the founder of the Workshop, Elinor Ostrom, to learn she had just been awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics. (Still the first & only woman to win that prize.)

My very simplistic understanding of Ostrom's work is this:

When it comes to managing commonly-held resources, individuals will organize into some form of collective self-government, and – most importantly -- that system works.

That is, when faced with the need to manage and share precious resources, individuals will naturally create a system that requires them (requires us) to work together.

We will find common ground; we will reach common agreement; we will acknowledge our individuals selves are best served when we work toward the common good. When we become and act as "us."

We can be proud non-conforming individuals AND successfully work towards the common good.

Individualism alone – the pursuit of liberty and self-interest alone – will not better society. Neither will exclusive focus on the common good. The individual soul needs a little liberty so its truth can be recognized and honored and we individuals need each other to get stuff done.

I believe in the power of the individual and in the beauty of our own agency. I also believe we need others and are strongest when we work together.

Here's the magic part. None of this is an either/or proposition. It's all about the "and."

Rabbi Sandy Sasso of Congregation Beth-El Zedeck is fond of asking if people know the most common word in the Bible. You might think it's "Thou, Thee, or even Beget," but it is "and."

"And" is the bridge that brings us together. We may not always meet happily in the middle of that bridge, but there's something to be said for working to build that bridge.

So it seems fitting to close by talking about "rights & responsibilities."

Rights & Responsibilities

Those studying for the U.S. naturalization test study the idea of "rights & responsibilities." If you go to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website you'll see a slew of rights & responsibilities listed.

Can you name some rights? [LISTEN]. Here's what you'll find online:

Freedom to express self (speech)

Freedom to worship as you wish (or not)

Right to a prompt, fair trial by jury (due process)

Right to vote

Right to run for office

Freedom to pursue "life, liberty, & the pursuit of happiness"

What do you think the U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services website lists as "responsibilities?" [LISTEN]. Here's what you'll find online:

Support & defend the Constitution

Stay informed on issues affecting your community

Participate in the democratic process

Respect and obey federal, state, & local laws

Respect the rights, beliefs, & opinions of others

Participate in your local community

Pay income and other taxes honestly & on time

Defend the country if the need should arise

We love our rights and well we should; they're beautiful and bold and some of the most generous in the world.

But we don't talk about those responsibilities as much. And we certainly don't talk about how our experiences receiving or being denied certain rights influences our sense of responsibility.

Historically, we know not everyone has had (or even has today) access to the same rights.

I've talked about this here before with you. About how when we study slavery, Native American genocide, Japanese internment and so much more ... we see, as Langston Hughes saw and wrote about in his great poem "Let America Be America Again" that, for many, *America was never America to me.*

If you've never read Hughes' poem, Google it later and read it! It masterfully addresses the tension that exists between the American Promise and American reality. Yet ... it ends with these words:

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

We started this morning by agreeing that America's civic values – liberty, equality, democracy ... -- are values we value, presumably because they're good & noble ideas. And they are! Hughes saw that ... and wanted those things. And he called out an American society that denied him these rights. He saw that as his responsibility.

And because we experience rights differently in this county – and because that experience then shapes how we feel about certain rights & understand our civic values – our demonstrations of "responsibility" can look very different from each other.

You might, for example, feel it is your responsibility to protest during a football game by taking a knee during the national anthem because your life experiences have taught you there is no other way to be heard.

Or, if promised to by politicians that an industry would always be there for you and your family; and it not only leaves your community but your country and those politicians who swore they'd always have your back are lining their pockets by the millions by that same industry – you might feel it is your responsibility to vote for an outsider.

The reality is the rights we value and the responsibilities we hold dear are influenced by a myriad of factors; by a myriad of competing interests and civic values.

These factors are why some people focus on rights related to individual liberties and others the rights for an entire group. It's why a particular right to one person might seem like a luxury issue while to others it is literally life & death.

These are some the civic tensions we need to acknowledge in trying to understand those we disagree with. Again, this isn't about agreeing – it's about understanding that given your neighbor's background and history, they might very be experiencing an America quite differently than you.

Keeping this in mind isn't going to solve all our civic woes. And it doesn't mean you need to go out and befriend a MAGA-hat wearing stranger or an AOC super fan. But it does mean it is worth the effort to dig deep and to try to see the humanity in the other if for no other reason than an "us and them" mentality is not only destructive to our civic fabric, but to our civic souls.

Living with the Tension

Despite the difficulty, it is absolutely possible to believe that liberty & democracy can go together like peanut butter & jelly. It just requires a little faith and trust in each other.

It requires us wrestle with and gain clarity around what it means to believe in the tradition of American individualism AND the idea we need each other.

Although they dance a tangled dance, we need to strive for understanding – if not agreement – on how and why civic values, our rights, and our responsibilities, look and feel different across the table.

My encouragement to you as you go out into the world striving to be a good citizen – someone who shows up for others in public life – is to not reflexively pick a side & firmly stick with it. Don't let consistency be the hobgoblin of your mind!

Rather, endeavor to live in the space in between – embrace the “and” – so that you can do the work of “becoming us” and help fulfill America's promise – help make America, America again – not only for yourself, but for the person sitting next to you.