

WISDOM CIRCLES

November 2013

What Does It Mean To Be A Citizen of a Democracy?

The English writer G.K. Chesterton said, “America is the only nation in the world founded on a creed,” one set forth “with theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence.” He called America “a nation with the soul of a church.” We must admit that the ideals of the Declaration are not yet realized. But without minimizing America’s wrongs, it is important to realize that very few people in human history and even most people in the world today don’t enjoy the freedoms that we enjoy.

In his brilliant book, *The American Soul*, philosopher Jacob Needleman wrote, “To be American is an idea, not an inescapable, organic given. America is a nation formed by philosophical ideas that have been thought through by human beings. It is the only nation in the world that is so constituted. America is not a tribal, ethnic or racial identity. It is a philosophical identity composed of ideas – of liberty, freedom, independent thought, independent conscience, self-reliance, hard work and justice.”

“My country right or wrong.” Those words were spoken in 1899 by Sen. Carl Shurtz and I agree with them. But we haven’t listened to the full quote. Shurtz said, “My country right or wrong. If right, to be kept right. If wrong, to be set right.”

These words are written the week after an extremist faction, in a petrified Congress, had shut down the government for two weeks and had avoided by just minutes a catastrophic default on our nation’s debts that would have plunged the world into economic chaos. It is well for us to remember the creed of our ancestors who dreamed of an America that is yet to be and to stand up for that dream in this time of peril.

Spiritual Exercise

The spiritual exercise for November is to write a letter to a politician. This can be a member of congress, a U.S. Senator, a state legislator or a local politician. It can be a mayor or the president. It can be a letter asking for support for an issue, objecting to a position on an issue or a vote, or a letter of thanks for a position or vote.

Don’t make this an e mail. A handwritten, snail-mail letter gets the most attention. Remember that this politician is a human being, with feelings. Whatever you think of the way they do their jobs, leadership in our society is a tough job. Address them as you would like to be addressed, especially if you are offering negative feedback. Thank them for the work they do. Acknowledge anything positive that you can sincerely acknowledge. And then, honestly and with civility, make your argument as forcefully as you can. Stick to the issues and avoid name calling and attributing bad motives.

As an example, here is a letter that the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh wrote to President George W. Bush about the Iraq war. We can't be Thich Nhat Hanh, but perhaps this letter can guide us on how to reach out to politicians as one human being to another.

Honorable George W. Bush
The White House
Washington DC, USA

Plum Village
Le Pey 24240
Thenac, France

Dear Mr President

Last night, I saw my brother (who died two weeks ago in the USA) coming back to me in a dream. He was with all his children. He told me, "Let's go home together." After a millisecond of hesitation, I told him joyfully, "Ok, let's go."

Waking up from that dream at 5 am this morning, I thought of the situation in the Middle East; and for the first time, I was able to cry. I cried for a long time, and I felt much better after about one hour.

Then I went to the kitchen and made some tea. While making tea, I realized that what my brother had said is true: our home is large enough for all of us. Let us go home as brothers and sisters.

Mr. President, I think that if you could allow yourself to cry like I did this morning, you will also feel much better. It is our brothers that we kill over there. They are our brothers, God tells us so, and we also know it. They may not see us as brothers because of their anger, their misunderstanding, and their discrimination. But with some awakening, we can see things in a different way, and this will allow us to respond differently to the situation. I trust God in you; I trust Buddha nature in you.

Thank you for reading.

In gratitude and with brotherhood,
Thich Nhat Hanh
Plum Village

You are invited to bring a copy of your letter to read to your Wisdom Circle and to share with the group what this experience meant to you.

Reflection Questions

Share a time when you have felt inspired and grateful for our American democracy. Share a time (just one!) when our democracy has disappointed you. How did you respond? What actions did you take?

Words of Wisdom

Did you, too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruit in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between [people], and their beliefs – in religion, literature, colleges and schools – democracy in all public and private life....

- Walt Whitman

When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and for a time they seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall – think of it, always.

- Mohandas K. Gandhi

Democracy is a non-stop experiment in the strengths and weaknesses of our political institutions, local communities, and the human heart – and its outcome can never be taken for granted. The experiment is endless, unless we blow up the lab, and the explosives to do the job are found within us. But so also is the heart's alchemy that can turn suffering into compassion, conflict into community, and tension into energy for creativity amid democracy's demands.

- Parker J. Palmer

The most important political office is that of the private citizen.

- Louis D. Brandeis

The only way to make sure people you agree with can speak is to support the rights of people you don't agree with.

- Eleanor Holmes Norton

The liberty of a democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of private power to a point where it becomes stronger than the democratic state itself. That in its essence is fascism: ownership of government by an individual, by a group, or any controlling private power.

- Franklin D. Roosevelt

At every turn when there has been an imbalance of power, the truth questioned, or our beliefs and values distorted, the change required to restore our nation has always come from the bottom up from our people.

- Howard Dean

Opinions are formed in a process of open discussion and public debate, and where no opportunity for the forming of opinions exists, there may be moods – moods of the masses and moods of individuals, the latter no less fickle and unreliable than the former – but no opinion.

- Hannah Arendt

Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.

- Reinhold Niebuhr

Representative government is closer to democracy than monarchy, and for this reason it has been hailed as one of the great political advances of modern times; yet, it is only a step in the direction of democracy, at its best.

- Howard Zinn

Elections are a good deal like marriages. There's no accounting for anyone's taste. Every time we see a bridegroom we wonder why she ever picked him, and it's the same with public officials.

- Will Rogers

The unconscious democracy of America is a very fine thing. It is a true and deep and instinctive assumption of the equality of citizens, which even voting and elections have not destroyed.

- G. K. Chesterton

There are no magic answers, no miraculous methods to overcome the problems we face, just the familiar ones: honest search for understanding, education, organization, action that raises the cost of state violence for its perpetrators or that lays the basis for institutional change -- and the kind of commitment that will persist despite the temptations of disillusionment, despite many failures and only limited successes, inspired by the hope of a brighter future.

- Noam Chomsky