Democracy and You – Part Five

Earlier in this series, it was proffered that democracy is not so easy to define. We who were educated in this country have come to accept that our form of democracy, as messy as it may have been described by some, is still more appealing than other forms of government including other so-called democracies. If one pays attention to the international news, comparisons are frequently made, and our system almost always comes out being the more favored, if we are to accept that at least some of the media are not too biased.

One of the major issues that makes democracy "messy" falls under the rights that we all enjoy under the U.S. Constitution. And the guaranteed right that seems to annoy everyone, usually when it is the other guy who is exercising it, is the right protected under the First Amendment: the right to speak without fear of the government getting on your case. Indeed, that same government is obliged to protect you if another citizen attempts to abridge, or restrict your speechifying, and there is a very broad interpretation of what is "speech". Mark Twain wrote, "In our country, we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence to never practice either." Those were tough times. But they're no easier today. It takes courage to speak your mind, to stand for some issue. (Twain had a lot to say about courage as well.) It's easy to plant the American flag in your yard. Who would take issue? But a flag supporting Gay Pride, or Black Lives Matter? Not as easy.

In a democracy, being able to speak your mind is important—especially for democracy. Back in the olden days, people didn't need to be able to converse in order to govern their territory; all the needed was a weapon more efficient than the other tribe. It was when humans decided that it made more sense to talk things out in order to settle things, rather than to kill each other (okay, so we're still getting the bugs out) that language came to be important. When groups of people were ruled by tyrants or kings who made up rules to keep themselves in power, there was less need of talking in order to get things done; in fact, if you were a person of little means and a little too clever with your words, you could find yourself exiled, or worse.

But democracy changed all that. When the people got together to try to get things done, the fellow who could use words better than others could accomplish more. Thus was born rhetoric. Although early scholars, Plato and Socrates, distrusted rhetoric, an enterprising Aristotle made a decent living by teaching others how to use the language with great effect. But they all agreed that with rhetoric in the wrong hands, an unscrupulous smart-talker could persuade people to do things that they would regret. This is where the word *demagogue* finds its way into the jargon; it means "people leader". The term obtained a negative connotation in Athens (Greece, not Georgia) as soon as the first troublemaker worked his magic on the innocents and rubes. That's one of the down sides of democracy. In a *dictatorship*, the a demagogue would be thrown in prison; but what if the dictator, the absolute ruler, turns out to be a demagogue?

Rhetoric has thrived, though many people still distrust those who can speak well. You know the type; the slick talkers who have not yet revealed themselves as trustworthy. Abraham Lincoln was a talented *rhetorician,* or orator. On more than one occasion while he was campaigning, people who came to hear him would walk away muttering, "He's a dangerous man. He can persuade you to agree with him in spite of yourself." Barack Obama is a contemporary talented orator. He is so good that when he was running for President, his opponents criticized him for it. Senator Rick Santorum said of Obama, "He's just a person of words", adding, "Words are everything to him." Mr. Santorum evidently used some other form of communication besides words to reach his own supporters in his Presidential run. Could be he communicated best with winks, nods, and dog whistles?

Those who get involved in local government hardly need be as skilled as a Barack Obama. But when involved with small organizations, some proficiency in the spoken word can be quite helpful and effective. In small town politics, there may be more than two positions on an issue, and there will not always be unanimous agreement. If you happen to be on the side that has fewer supporters, this is when skill with facts and rhetoric can work in

combination to lure a few over to your side. Facts are important, but when facts are few and opinions are needed, so is the ability to express them well. Preparation and passion are good allies to have in such instances.

If you are interested in more information about participating in democracy, by either running for or being appointed to public office, or if you would like to volunteer to work to help promote democracy, please contact the Sprague Democratic Town Committee.

Please refer previous essays in this series, or review other sections of this website, if you are not sure if your ideology, that is, your opinions about public issues, suggests that you could support the principles of the Democratic Party.