Democracy and You – Part Two

In part one of this series about democracy, we learned that democracy is hard to define. To begin with: If democracy is "rule by the people", one must ask, "Okay, but which people?" When this fair land became a country, only white men who owned property could vote. That means everyone else, including not just poor white men, but women too, could not vote. Free black men couldn't vote, and black slaves were not even considered persons, but rather property. And the indigenous tribes, well, forget it. Over time, through struggle and Constitutional Amendment, some of those groups were eventually included, though people paying attention to the news these days recognize that individual States have tried to make it harder for certain groups to enjoy the *franchise* (from Old French "free"), another way of saying "free to vote".

With all this rich (and sometimes violent) history of struggling to gain the right to participate in democracy, one would think we would appreciate the efforts made by our ancestors, and yet—aside from certain anomalous Presidential and Senatorial elections, there has been a decline in participation, particularly at the local level. Why might that be? Local elections are where one's vote can have the most impact, with elections or municipal referenda or town meetings being decided by a mere handful of votes. This provides an opportunity for organized groups with special interests to wield influence to pass measures important to their cause. Yet we do not see a lot of this happening.

Of course, we like the *idea* of participatory government, even if we choose not to participate. Sometimes it's not easy to see how your rights have been *abrogated*, that is, taken from you, until you see it happen in front of your eyes, as when, not long ago, a group of legislators tried to expel a couple of representatives of districts in Tennessee. When you and your neighbors elect someone, you expect to have reserved the right to decide whether to re-elect them, and no one is going to take that away. Right? But, then, if you didn't vote in the first place, some would say you have relinquished the right to object.

None of this explains why people choose to get involved—or not. Certainly people have different reasons for jumping into the fray. One reason is because they are upset or angry at some perceived grievance and decide that they are going to get involved. The more benign citizen does it because he or she just wants to help, or "give back" to their community. Did you ever think about how people get into local public office? Where do they come from? And if you were to take an interest in getting involved, who might you call, or email?

We're not talking about paid positions, by the way; we're talking about people who volunteer to be on boards so as to improve their community. We're talking about people who just want to make a difference, although it should be mentioned here that things are getting so desperate that some municipalities are granting stipends or tax credit to volunteers if they meet certain conditions.

Most people don't want to get involved because things are "too political". Well, guess what? As George Orwell said (and he said a lot), "In our age, there is no such thing as keeping out of politics…", and let's face it, everything is and always has been political. Molly Ivins said, "You can't ignore politics, no matter how much you'd like to", but she also said, "Keep fighting for freedom and justice, beloveds, but don't forget to have fun doin' it." Now that's a good attitude.

The problem is, everyone lives with the prejudices of their life experiences, so if you do want to get involved, in order to save yourself time and trouble, you'll probably first need to assess your political position on things that matter—and don't try to say you don't have an opinion. You do, you just may not want to share it with people. That's okay. You can figure out of you lean Democrat or Republican. Just be honest with yourself. There are questionnaires on-line that can help you sort things out.

And if you find yourself leaning left (That's the lingo for Democrats. Guess what Republicans are?), and want to find out more about getting involved in your community, then reach out; we Democrats will be there for you, and having fun.