

THE DANGER OF THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

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Years ago when I taught at Cathedral High School in Boston, I had students who were recent immigrants from many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe. In the years when there was a presidential election with the resulting inauguration, I would bring a television into the classroom and as the different groups came into my classroom, we would sit together and watch the inauguration.

One year, one of my students asked why we were doing this, was it because I liked the person being inaugurated that day. My reply was the following: We are watching the most powerful person on earth voluntarily turn over that power to another person, a process that repeats itself regularly, whenever a new person is elected to the presidency. In the US we know that no matter who has held the office of the president, at the end of the term to which the person was elected, that office and that power must be turned over to the next person elected. That was why we were watching. It was a lesson in democratic process.

The other piece of the democratic process that we used to discuss was the balance of powers, the system of checks and balances between the three branches of the US federal government. Designed to hold each branch of responsible, not only for itself but also for the operations of the other two branches, this system has endured through decades, through war and peace, through times of economic struggle and times of prosperity.

There are so many other parts of the democratic process that we take for granted in the US. At an early age we learn "majority wins". Whether on the playground or in class, we learn that the majority in any situation determines what we are going to do. So the task is to convince the others, to create a new majority with whom we agree. Democracy is both content and process. The content are the ideas, the actions and structures we put in place; the process is the system, built on respect for both other persons and other ideas, that allows the ideas, the actions and the structures to function. Together, these are the base of democracy.

In these heady days after this momentous November election, we have seen the democratic process in operation. Despite all the negative advertisements, the expenditures of huge amounts of money, and the efforts, oftentimes, of the media to marginalize the issues, people were able to focus when they voted and realize that change is what we, as a country, need at the present time. This is the reality of the power of the majority vote. Without guns, without force, the majority has spoken. Come 2007, a new Congress will be installed. This process needs to be honored for its ability to peacefully bring about change, to peacefully recognize the power of the people, and to peacefully offer hope that the future will be different.

Yet, our democratic process is in danger.

While there are a number of issues that could be raised, there are four core dangers on which we need to focus.

Danger 1: Challenge to the balance of powers in our government.

I am continually reminded of the conversations with my students when I hear the media reports about the efforts of high-level executive branch office-holders to usurp the power of the other two branches AND to claim that the president is not accountable either to the other branches of the federal government and/or to the people of the US. These efforts are a direct challenge to our democratic form of government and to our constitution.

Danger 2: Silencing the voices of many whose voices need to be heard

I remember a conversation years ago with colleagues from Latin America. We were grieving the death of some of the community leaders with whom we had been working in Latin America. We commented that there were three groups who oftentimes seem to be in danger: the political leaders, teachers, and religious leaders. It was easy to understand why. Each of these talked and taught about the possibility of the future being different. Political leaders worked to change the system. Teachers taught people how to read and write, and how to share ideas with one another. Religious leaders taught about the value of each and every human being, made in the image and likeness of God. Together, they all were able to provide leadership, to bring forth the best of what we all have to offer.

In other countries, the establishment kills people whom they see as dangerous. In the U.S. we mock people. This mockery is really dangerous, even as we sometimes find ourselves laughing, because what we mock we do not respect, and therefore those voices are silenced. So how do we learn to listen again even as we find other ways to vent our frustration?

Danger 3: Our educational standards

Our educational system is failing to properly prepare our country's students. We have lost sight of:

- the difference between progressing from one grade to another
 - and learning the skills attached to each grade level.
- the difference between having a degree or diploma
 -and having content knowledge and analytical skills.
- the difference between seeing things from our own point of view
 - ...and understanding things from the viewpoint of many people.
- the difference between seeing education as a cost
 - ...and seeing education as an investment.

Danger 4: Taking our democratic system for granted

We need to remember that democracy is both content and process. The content is our constitution and our legislative and judicial heritage. The process is the manner in which we, as a nation, live out and act upon that content. Our democracy is a treasure to be celebrated, respected, safeguarded, and handed down to our children and those who come seeking to share in it. May we never take it for granted!