

Preserving Democracy: What does it mean? For whom? How?

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We will soon be celebrating the birth of the American national narrative contained in the Declaration of Independence. This document is our foundational "origin story" and articulates a shared civic identity. The Declaration of Independence explains who we are and who we want to be as a country. It articulates what we stand for and explains our unique place in the world. The Declaration of Independence establishes the foundational American narrative of universal human equality based on innate human dignity, natural rights, and government limited by the consent of the governed. Preserving democracy means preserving the ideals of the Declaration of Independence narrative and extending it to all.

While these ideals were revolutionary when they were articulated, from the beginning of this nation these ideals were limited in practice, as marginalized groups like women, Native Americans, and enslaved people were denied these fundamental rights. American history is largely defined by the ongoing struggle and social movements to bridge the gap between our lofty ideals and the reality of everyday life. We celebrate the Declaration of Independence but do its ideals really guide American politics today? Are we simply engaging in empty celebrations on July 4th?

The American narrative changes over time and has to be done and redone. But the Declaration of Independence should be our lodestar, focusing and guiding our journey.

Today we face competing national narratives. Which will prevail?

Some have been and are still being excluded from inclusion in the American narrative. Some would like the American Narrative of hope and opportunity to only apply to members of their tribe. Some espouse what is called American exceptionalism that only sees the good in our story while ignoring the bad. Exceptionalism adherents only see inevitable progress while realists see the systemic injustices, such as indigenous displacement, slavery, racial and gender inequality and ethnocentrism. Some see an American narrative that only espouses individualism while ignoring pursuit of the common good and social justice. Realistically the promise of the Declaration of Independence has been reserved for only a privileged few and requires continuous, radical reform to be fully realized.

For some our narrative is forward-looking that sees that the U.S. must constantly reinvent itself, adapt to modern realities, and update its social and political systems to rectify historical and contemporary wrongs. For others, our narrative is backward-looking that venerates some glorious, mythical past. It emphasizes the traditional family values and the belief that the nation's core strengths are rooted in its past cultural traditionalism that ignore the promise of the Declaration of Independence to and for all.

So, what is our American narrative today? For too many it is a narrative of intolerance, misogyny, ethnocentrism, tribalism and fear of the different. There is a national narrative that preaches national decline occasioned by the decay of our traditional values coupled with revival if we but follow a strong leader. Subscribers to this view minimize democracy's importance and are willing to use violence to achieve what they consider to be a perfect state.

But there are those of us who still espouse the founding promissory American narrative that emphasizes that enduring belief that our journey toward justice and equality is an ongoing moral responsibility of each one of us. There are still those of us who subscribe to the democratic faith of moral equality of all, equity, individual rights grounded in human nature, mutual forbearance and tolerance, the wisdom of collective decision-making and the idea that leaders are accountable to the public.

The Declaration of Independence narrative envisions all being included equally. It is a narrative of equality shared by all. President Kennedy said this nation will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.

The Declaration of Independence is an exodus narrative—a narrative of escaping tyranny and striving toward a promised land of liberty and justice. This journey takes many twists and turns; has triumphs and tragedies. We have not arrived at the promised land of the Declaration of Independence. The issue is do we persevere in the journey. Do we still want to make the trip as a nation?

Which of the competing American narratives will we choose on July 4th?

Where you see wrong or inequality or injustice, speak out, because this is your country. This is your democracy. Make it. Protect it. Pass it on. Thurgood Marshall

THE ETHICAL BASIS OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy is not just a simple mechanism for voting and counting votes. IT IS A MORAL COMMITMENT TO TREAT ALL FELLOW CITIZENS AS FREE AND EQUAL PARTNERS IN A SHARED COMMUNITY. ***This is the democratic faith.***

MORAL EQUALITY

We all have the same basic moral worth. That is why we have equal protection under the law.

Nelson Mandela: *"To deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity."*

Desmond Tutu: *"My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together."*

EQUITY

We have to level the playing field for the victims of injustice. We cannot and should not expect those who have been the victims of centuries of oppression to suddenly be able to compete equally with those who have benefited from these centuries of oppression.

Lyndon Johnson said in his commencement speech at Howard University: *But freedom is not enough. You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please.*

You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, "you are free to compete with all the others," and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.

Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.

INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY AND RIGHTS

Simply because we are human, we have human rights. Government exists to protect those rights. If it does not, we have the right to change the government, i.e. alter it or abolish it. Because we have human dignity, we are free. Therefore, democratic government is warranted because it is the only form of government that protects these human rights. *Rightful liberty is unobstructed action according*

*to our will within the limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others. —
Thomas Jefferson*

MUTUAL FORBEARANCE AND PLURALISM

We absolutely must avoid the tyranny of the majority. We must cherish diversity. We must include all in our national narrative. Because we are equal, no one has the right to impose their purely personal beliefs on others. We must reject all attempts to impose a stifling uniformity on the nation.

COLLECTIVE WISDOM AND PARTICIPATION

Diverse perspectives are valuable. There is no one absolute political truth. We discover correct public policy through free debate and discussion. No one person is the reposit of political truth. Collective problem solving produces the best outcomes. Aristotle: *"For the many, of whom each individual is not a good man, when they meet together may be better than the few good, if regarded not individually but collectively, just as a feast to which many contribute is better than a dinner provided out of a single purse."*

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Leaders are temporary holders of power and must serve the common good—not their own interest. The holders of political power are our representatives and are beholden and accountable and responsible to us—all of us-black, white, brown, yellow, tan; gay, straight, bi, trans; all genders; all ages; all income levels; all faiths or no faith; all ethnic backgrounds—**ALL** of us. *Who will guard the guardians themselves.* Juvenal

A true American subscribes to these. A true American promotes these. THE ONLY LEGITIMATE POLITICAL SYSTEM PROMOTES THESE PRINCIPLES AND OPERATES WITH THE CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED, UPHOLDS JUSTICE, RESPECTS BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMAN DIGNITY AND SUBSCRIBES TO THE RULE OF LAW. This is the democracy we must act to preserve.

