

Guestwords: Democratic Discourse

Gerald J. Gargiulo

When I was a young man, I recall President Truman saying that we lived in a Christian nation – a remark that was not greeted with much acceptance. Unfortunately, such a sentiment is not just of historical interest. We are witness, today, as we know, to the growth of fundamentalism, what I would classify as a totalitarian consciousness, in both religious denominations and political ideologies. Consequently, I think it is legitimate to ask: Can one speak of a democracy and in the same breath speak of any nation as being Christian, Islamic, or Jewish? Do religious or ethnic identifications go together with democracy? The founders of American democracy evidenced profound political wisdom in their separation of church and state. They understood something about the nature of belief and the requirements of a democratic consciousness that many present-day politicians and religious leaders seem unaware of. They understood that democracy demands more than just a quiet acceptance of each person's convictions; it requires a

change in one's understanding of both the function of religion in a civil society and the function of political beliefs.

The genius of representative democracy is the ability it fosters, and in a sense demands, of its citizens to distinguish between the particular content of any belief, that is, “what” one believes, and the recognition that most people need some belief system, some type of personal definition. The mark of any totalitarian system is its inability – either out of a grab for power or a basic lack of understanding of what free choice means – to distinguish between the human need for political or religious convictions and the content, that is, the “what,” of those convictions. Totalitarian consciousness is similar to fundamentalist thinking in that it provides the belief content, that is, the “what” one believes. This is clear, for example, in the issue of school prayer, setting up in public buildings engraved carvings of the Ten Commandments, or restrictions on who may or may not get married in a civil ceremony; in such cases we are being given “what” we are supposed to believe. A well functioning democracy, by definition, doesn't confuse our very human need for self-definition with any objective creed or political position. A democratic consciousness imposes no answers, promotes no particular religious conviction or political ideology outside that of protecting the general welfare of people. Such awareness seems rather obvious; it

seems to follow from the very definition of democracy, yet it is being overshadowed in our present political discourse.

Democratic consciousness is grounded in the awareness that alternate philosophies of life are the only guaranteed safeguard to everyone's freedom. This is based on the recognition that imposed truth is, in actuality, no truth at all – it is intimidation. And intimidation gives birth to loyalty oaths. McCarthyism was not just a dark period in American political history – it was and is, ultimately, a mindset. The most powerful weapon in the world, as we know, is an idea. A foreign enemy, for example, who witnesses an elected leader during a time of war being criticized, is one of the best examples of democracy that I can think of. Not to know this is not to understand democracy at all.

When citizens engage in open debate, based on informed thinking, aware of the ever-present possibility of personal error, we have the opposite of totalitarian and/or fundamentalist consciousness. A democratic consciousness tolerates the anxiety that the lack of certainty entails. What the western world knew twenty-five hundred years ago in Athens had to be remembered anew with the dawn of western democracies. Democracy is not just a different political system guaranteeing religious and political freedom; in its fullest realization, it is a growth in human consciousness. One of the

many deaths each person has to overcome is the death that absolute certitude brings. In its promise to respect individuality, in its refusal to celebrate any particular content, democracy is the best guarantor that any religious content or any political conviction will have a voice; but it demands, as I have mentioned, that one give up the consolation of certitude.

Is democracy served merely by its citizens voting? I have suggested that democracy imposes something more basic, namely, the obligation not only to respect individuality in all its many colors, particularly when those colors clash with one's personal surroundings, but also and particularly to appreciate and foster open discussion. Such a position is basic for developing a democratic consciousness. Respecting individuality is, quite obviously, the opposite of name-calling. When an individual proclaims an opponent to be "liberal" or "conservative," or one of their many variations – that is, when an individual uses such terms to *accuse* rather than to *define* – he or she is foreclosing the experience of a democratic consciousness and, in fact, laying the groundwork for a totalitarian consciousness.

Open dialogue is very easy to affirm; it is extremely difficult to implement, yet it is the cornerstone of a democratic consciousness. Without it, we lose an essential advance in civilization.

Gerald J. Gargiulo, Ph.D., is a psychotherapist residing and practicing in East Hampton.