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An Expanding Spirit of Democracy

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“... Earth, our home, is alive, with a unique community of life...”

How we might unlock hope in an expansive spirit of democracy for present and future generations in this time of upheaval? As the underside of American society is being revealed and the stark inequities and racial prejudices made manifest, we are called to reflect on what brought us to this disturbing state of affairs. With shock and recrimination we are responding to the truth of our history and the entrenched habits of structural racism along with economic inequity [1]. This history is revealing itself in the consequences of brutal slavery and Jim Crow laws, the near extermination of Native Americans, subsequent

theft of land and banishment to reservations, the ongoing history of discrimination against Latinx, Asian, and immigrant communities, and the endless overseas wars and militarization of our society at the expense of the wellbeing of humans and nature.

How do we look clearly at our history and, through reexamining it, seek ways forward? Can we own our past and create a more equitable society, just economics, and inclusive politics? May we ask forgiveness and restore compassion? Can we recognize that democracy rests on peace, not violence and bloated military bud-

gets? In short, how can we rediscover and expand the spiritual roots of democracy?

As these roots lie in the hope of living with inclusive representation in government, with equitable participation in society, and with fairness of opportunity for education and jobs, our challenge is how to make this viable [2]. This will be impossible without a recognition that humans are interwoven with each other and with the larger kinship of life—interconnected and interdependent. This is because relationality is at the heart of life. In this spirit, an authentic democracy affirms the inherent dignity of humans and the intrinsic worth of nature.

Our task, then, is to enhance the wellbeing of both humans and nature as a basis for a truly comprehensive democracy [3]. Clearly, we can't have a healthy democracy that rests on polluted air, contaminated water, and toxic soil disproportionately exposing people of color to these risks. Our question is how can we find our way back to being members of the Earth community on this precious blue green planet that has given birth to an extraordinary diversity of life - human and more than human?

In this search to expand what community is, we might first examine some historic documents that led to our democracy today, imperfect as it is. These are noteworthy to build on, but we need to enlarge their potential.

We can look at ancient Greek democracy and find it aspirational, but wanting in full participation. That is because it limited decision-making to an elite and excluded others, such as enslaved peoples. We can read the Magna Carta (1215) and see it as a beginning of limiting monarchical rule. However, newly codified privileges of the aristocracy still omitted "the people" [4].

We can hold up the dream of liberty in the American Declaration of Independence (1776), but observe that what became the republic reserved power and privilege to propertied white men. The declaration proclaims that "all men are created equal," but slavery was enshrined in the American social code. As the abolitionist Frederick Douglass said in a Fourth of July speech in 1852: "...you maintain a system as barbarous and dreadful as ever stained the character of a nation - a system begun in avarice, supported in pride, and perpetuated in cruelty" [5]. The drafters of the declaration highlighted "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as inalienable rights. But now we recognize that "life" needs to be expanded to include all life, "liberty" broadened to embrace all races and genders, and the "pursuit of happiness" widened beyond material consumption.

We can cite the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789) and say it is inspiring but still not sufficient. We observe that "liberty, equality, and fraternity" were noble aspirations of the French Revolution for all countries, but insufficiently realized

as the colonial and postcolonial periods illustrate. We can examine the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and rejoice in its laudable goals, among which are protections against torture and slavery and upholding personal liberty, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. But we lament that it is still wanting in full adherence and broader inclusion here in the United States and around the world.

So where do we look for aspiration and inspiration to be reunited with the spiritual roots of our democratic yearnings? We may begin with indigenous traditions that have strong cosmovisions celebrating the kinship of all life forms and communitarian social ethics that emphasize a shared common good.

We might start with the Haudenosaunee Confederacy that began in 1142 and exists into the present. Benjamin Franklin was familiar with the Confederacy and referred to it during discussions in the Constitutional Congress. The original Confederacy was a model of peace and consensus-building that arose in response to a period of intense warfare among five related tribal groups. Focusing on harmonious relations between the tribes, it also highlights the importance of decision-making that keeps in mind seven generations into the future. Doing so links social and ecological wellbeing. Intergenerational justice is valued by the Haudenosaunee tribes. These are peoples who hold relationality and kinship among species to be a sacred trust. Thus an expanded spirit of democracy encompasses a broader solidarity among humans and across generations. Moreover, this sacred trust implies fostering the flourishing of the biosphere.

We also need to examine global statements of the last forty years pointing to a broader spirit of democracy that includes both people and planet. We can start with the UN World Charter for Nature (1982) [6]. It is an eloquent tribute to the basis for democracy resting in the health of ecosystems [7]. It states: "The degradation of natural systems owing to excessive consumption and misuse of natural resources, as well as to failure to establish an appropriate economic order among peoples and among States, leads to the breakdown of the economic, social and political framework of civilization."

Most especially, we can look at the Earth Charter (2000), a declaration of interdependence that highlights the need for a new integration of ecological integrity, social and economic justice, democracy, non-violence and peace [8]. Ecological health and inclusive justice are the basis for human wellbeing and a viable democracy. The Preamble begins with a statement that is clearly relevant now:

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a

common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Another document we may cite is the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth (Earth Day 2010). This arose after the failure of the UN climate conference in Copenhagen in 2009. The World's Peoples Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth drew together some 30,000 people, largely indigenous, in Cochabamba, Bolivia in April 2010. A drafting committee wrote the declaration that was released at the conference on Earth Day. The declaration is based on indigenous cosmologies of a living Earth community as the basis for a flourishing society, a functional politics, and a just economic system.

What distinguishes the World Charter for Nature, the Earth Charter, and the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth is that they are planetary in scope and involve the expansion of rights to include all people as well as nature itself. This broadened movement is being pushed forward by events such as we are living through – a pandemic that shows us humans and nature are interdependent and racial upheaval that illustrates we are all interconnected.

Thus, the spiritual roots of democracy lie in the aspiration that we can move through this period to reassert interdependence and interconnection in ways that are both ancient and new, simultaneously ecologically and economically viable, and, most critical, politically and socially imperative.

Such aspiration is evident in the Papal encyclical *Laudato Si* (2015). This letter is a call for an integral ecology that brings together the “cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor.” In this spirit, mutually enhancing human-Earth relations need to be based on environmental justice and social participation. Pope Francis highlights the principle of the common good along with transparency in decision making. He calls for politics and economics to be in dialogue for human fulfillment. Certainly this is a basis for an expanded spirit of democracy.

A broader context for these documents and movements is our growing recognition that we have emerged as part of a universe story [9]. As the Earth Charter states and as indigenous people have recognized: “Humanity is part of a vast evolving Universe. Earth, our home, is alive, with a unique community of life.” This sensibility offers a narrative that illustrates how all life originated in the cosmic explosion of stars where the elements arose. Moreover, we humans have a common origin arising out of Africa, leading to migration around the planet, and the ongoing formation of unique cultures, complex societies, and varied political systems.

This story helps us to realize that we are biocultural beings joined by both unity and diversity. From this perspective a functional democracy is unlikely to thrive unless it rests on ecologically and culturally vibrant roots. We are trustees for ensuring this process. Elevating a sense of public trust for a healthy planet for future generations is the basis of a thriving democracy. We may now be in the process of creating, over time and with much struggle, biocultural democracies with variations across countries and regions [10].

Is this possible? Is it probable? Let us not allow cynicism and despair to foreshorten our aspirations, for our survival as a species may depend on it.

What would this look like? Can we dream again amid such unraveling of life and communities? Can we revive and expand the spirit of democracy for our time, for our challenges? Can we draw on the great movements that have preceded us, such as the abolition of slavery and the fight for civil rights, women's rights, and gay rights? Can we call on new spiritual depths that acknowledge the great mystery of being that contains us all? Can we awaken a fresh reverence for the dynamic complexity of life in which we are embedded?

Such a dream may be our best hope. For we need to create, with due process, vibrant democracies where:

- political systems hold in trust the foundations for genuine flourishing of life – human and more than human;
- legal systems ensure equity for people and inclusion for species and healthy ecosystems;
- economic systems are regarded as subsystems of nature's economy and function in service to the common good of clean air, water, and soil;
- financial systems build a basis for community prosperity not individual greed;
- educational systems teach valuing the integration of ecology, justice, peace, and democracy;
- religions bring forth new understandings of the dignity of human life and all life;
- health care systems are based on the assumption that we can't have healthy people on a sick planet;
- agricultural systems aim to deliver nourishing food to feed large numbers of people.

All of this is aspirational, yes. But also practical and doable. We need to begin by redefining community as including the greater Earth community – humans and more than humans.

Indeed, there is no lasting future for democracy without a biological basis for life. Thus, a biocultural democracy is the recognition that our common home is the one rare blue green planet that we share. May its future flourishing be our greatest priority, the wellbeing of the human community be our constant aspiration, and the great mystery of life our deepest spiritual inspiration.

Notes:

[1] See Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States (New York: Harper Collins, 1980, reprinted many times, latest edition in 2015).

[2] This is developed by Steven Rockefeller, “Renewing the American Democratic Faith”, D. Orr, A Gumbel, B. Kitwana, W. Becker, eds. Democracy Unchained: How to Rebuild Government for the People. New York: New Press, 2020).

[3] There are various projects already working on this. They include The Democracy Collaborative, Our Common Purpose: Reinventing Democracy for the 21st Century, Democracy the Unites Us.

[4] We might return also to the Charter of the Forest (1217) issued two years after the Magna Carta. This Charter allowed common people access into the royal forests for firewood, farming, and grazing. The enclosure movement that peaked in the 18th and 19th centuries pushed back the democratic inclinations of the Charter. Eventually it was superseded by the Wild Creatures and Forest Laws Act in 1971. However, some of its statues endured for 800 years and this was commemorated in 2017 with a new Charter for Trees, Woods and People.

[5] Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” July 5, 1852. Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999).

[6] This was signed by all 111 member states at the time, except the United States with 18 abstentions.

[7] Two more human centered documents should be noted. In 1993 the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic was drafted by theologian Hans Kung and adopted by the Parliament of World Religions. It was updated to include the environment in the 2018 Parliament in Toronto. The Charter for Compassion, drafted primarily by religious scholar, Karen Armstrong, was announced in 2009 and points to the need for cities, schools, places of worship, and businesses to adopt practical steps to implement compassionate practices.

[8] This document, over a decade in drafting, represents one of the most participatory civil society document of its kind.

[9] See Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, The Universe Story (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992) and Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, Journey of the Universe (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

[10] The historian Lynn White first used the term biodemocracy in his article, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis” (Nature, March 1967).

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