

THE GENIUS OF AMERICA

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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In three days, the 2016 edition of the World Series of Politics will be over. And for me at least, the election can't happen soon enough. Over the past few weeks, Winston Churchill's quip has ceaselessly come to mind — that democracy is the worst form of government ever devised, except for all the other options that have been tried.

The fact that other forms of governance may be worse doesn't mean that this one isn't sometimes hard to take. As Americans, we have not done ourselves proud. I have lots of company in saying that I'm ready for this election to be over.

That's a shame, because an unyielding commitment to democracy is one of the best things about our nation. And besides, as the hymn says that we just sang together, "This is my home, the country where my heart is; here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine." But all is not well in my country.

University of Chicago philosopher and legal scholar Martha Nussbaum points out in her book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* that people need to know some things in order for democracy to work. She writes:

Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance...

With Election Day looming on Tuesday, I'd like us to think together for a few minutes about democracy and what's missing today in its exercise.

We begin with a small bronze statue of Justice that stands atop a bookshelf in Holly's and my bedroom in our apartment. The statue is similar to the ones atop City Hall downtown and on the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C., only smaller. Justice was one of four virtues celebrated by the ancient Greeks; the other three were Prudence, Fortitude, and Temperance. In most depictions, Justice stands with a balance scale in her left hand to weigh the merits of the case, and a sword in her right hand to mete out punishment to the deserving.

Young children, when they look at Justice, usually ask why she wears a blindfold. We explain that she wears it because Justice is supposed to be blind to who you are. What is wrong is wrong, and what is right is right, no matter if you are the king or the gardener. As Aristotle said, justice is the search for a neutral standard, and law — ideally, at least — is a neutral standard.

Taken as a whole, justice is about the character of the public world: the laws and institutions that make up our common life as a nation. Justice is not only about how we deal with crime, but also how we educate our children, tax individuals and businesses, distribute resources, conduct commerce, negotiate treaties, and so on. Justice is about constructing our public world so that all the individuals who live in it are fully able to do what human beings are supposed to do.

But what is that? Aristotle believed the purpose of life was to achieve — the word in Greek is *eudaimonia*, and it is often but unhelpfully translated as — happiness. He did not mean that the purpose of life is to feel pleasure or contentment. Rather, *eudaimonia* is the state of something fully becoming whatever it could uniquely become. In this sense, a drill bit would be happy when making a hole in a piece of wood; a violin would be happy when sounding the notes of, say, a sonata by Paganini.

What is the purpose of human life in these terms? The Greeks believed the purpose of life was to become virtuous, which involved, among other things, displaying courage in battle. The medieval theologian St. Augustine sought a more religious answer to the question. He said, famously, that the purpose of human life is to love God and enjoy God forever. How to fulfill this purpose has been a matter of considerable debate and bloodshed over the centuries. At a minimum, love of God requires Christians to obey God's commands as revealed in divine scripture and interpreted by the church.

Over the centuries, believers found that scripture could sometimes provide an adequate foundation for religious life. But serious problems developed when they tried to translate scripture into public policy. Even in nations where everyone agreed on which God to worship and which scripture to read, disagreements were unavoidable. Over time, the religious wars in Europe became frequent and ferocious.

In part because of this violence, John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers rejected Augustine's approach. They asserted that the purpose of human life is not dictated by divine revelation, but rather is determined by human reason. Locke believed that the purpose of life is for each human being to decide for him or herself what the purpose of life is. It was in this spirit that the founders of the United States established our nation.

The founders understood that what is unique about human beings is not our ability to conform to a supposedly divine plan, but rather our ability to decide for ourselves how to live. The Preamble to the Constitution says that "in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity" — in order to accomplish these things, "We the people"

ordain and establish the Constitution for the United States of America. Not God in heaven. Not a king across the sea. Our nation was founded not by divine or royal decree, but by human decision.

This is the point, however, where I think it's easy to become confused and go astray. If the purpose of human life is for each of us to choose our own way of life, then it would seem reasonable that public policy should give us maximum freedom to do whatever we want in choosing our way of life. If maximizing individual freedom is the only goal of public policy, then our public laws and institutions should be completely neutral about the choices we make.

On these terms, the goal of our political system should not be to ensure that we make good choices, but to ensure only that we are completely free to make them. Policymakers shouldn't care whether someone spends Monday evenings feeding the homeless at All Souls or watching violent porn on an iPhone. But over time, what people value and how they spend their time collectively determine our national character.

Make no mistake: the freedom to decide what we value and to choose our own way of life is the defining characteristic of life in a modern democracy. But to flourish as human beings, we need more than that. We also need good options from which to choose, and we need to know how to evaluate the various options before us in order to decide which one is best. Without a sense of direction, being free is another term for being lost.

At its best, democracy is an ongoing, purposeful conversation — sometimes an argument or even a battle — about the wise use of human freedom. It grapples with the proper character of the cultural and political environment in which each of us attempts to live a meaningful life. The purpose of our common world is to maximize the freedom to choose not only freely but also wisely, the direction our lives will take. In order for democracy to flourish and perhaps even to survive, it ultimately requires that freedom be given direction by a larger sense of purpose. The question is where this sense of purpose comes from — this commitment to a goal that extends beyond our individual needs and desires.

In 1831, a twenty-five-year-old French aristocrat named Alexis de Tocqueville came to the United States in order to study the American people and their political institutions. In a two-volume report of his visit, titled *Democracy in America*, he wrote: "I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there; in the fertile fields and boundless prairies, and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits, aflame with righteousness, did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

De Tocqueville's principal claim in this passage is that America's political greatness derived from its commitment to religion. In more general terms, he was saying that public policies express fundamental values that come from somewhere else.

But the basic headline was that America's political values, which were great, depended upon America's religious commitments, which were good.

From the American perspective, however, the relationship has always been more complicated than that. It's true that our most deeply-held values, traditionally identified as religious values, ultimately determine our political views. But the religious views of Americans have always varied widely, and in order to keep the peace, we've wisely kept the institutions of church and state separate from the very beginning.

Over time, this necessary separation of church and state has driven an unnecessary wedge between our most deeply-held values, whether we describe them as religious or not, and our common life as citizens. We've learned to keep our deepest values to ourselves. As it turns out, this approach works as long as it works. But when things really matter, it fails badly.

In the 1858 debates between Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln over the morality of slavery, Douglas asserted that the federal government should remain neutral on the issue, since people were bound to disagree. The only hope of holding the country together, he argued, was to respect the right of citizens in each state and territory to decide these questions for themselves.

Lincoln disagreed, insisting that it was reasonable to set aside the question of slavery only if slavery were not the moral evil Lincoln considered it to be. In other words, the debate was mostly not about slavery, but about whether to set aside a moral controversy for the sake of political expediency. Lincoln put the matter succinctly: "Is it not false statesmanship that undertakes to build up a system of policy upon the basis of caring nothing about the very thing that everybody cares the most about?"

When Lincoln referred to "the very thing that everybody cares the most about," he made the point that public policy is an expression of whatever values people care most about. As de Tocqueville suggested, political values derive from other more fundamental values — call them moral values, as Lincoln did, or even religious values, as de Tocqueville did. In De Tocqueville's case, he said the values that make America great derive initially not from the policies designed by its political leaders, but rather from the righteousness proclaimed by its preachers.

While de Tocqueville correctly observed that democracy serves more fundamental moral or religious values, he's off the mark in assuming that America's preachers have always made moral goodness the touchstone of their values. The legacy religious traditions of this nation have a decidedly mixed record when it comes to all sorts of moral issues — slavery, women's rights, civil rights, gay rights, environmental justice, and so on. Even so, de Tocqueville's point remains: political values express moral values that come from somewhere else.

The question is from where. At their best, the legacy traditions of faith have indeed been a source of moral capital. But their influence is now waning; more and more people today are not affiliated with a community of faith. Even so, I believe that enlightened communities of faith — again, at their best — remain essential to

democracy. We need communities of spiritual practice to develop ways of living in which each element of creation exists in beneficial relationship with everything else.

Now more than ever, we need to talk as a nation about the wise use of human freedom — about what a good life looks like, and about why some choices are better than others. The genius of America is that we aspire as a nation to harness the individual freedom that democracy brings to the commitment to the common good that faith and spirituality bring. And yes, the future of democracy hangs in the balance.