

Democracy Demands Equality

Goldwin Emerson, gandjemerson@rogers.com

London Free Press, April 16, 2016

Humanism is founded upon ethical principles. The Humanist 2012 Amsterdam Declaration of ethical principles includes the following statement. *"Humanists uphold the broadest application of democratic principles in human relationships."* The term "democratic", from its Greek origins, *demos* and *kratos*, means people rule or people power.

There are many different ways of practicing democracy. Thirty years ago on a university lecture tour in China, I was discussing what democracy means to Canadians. At that time, my Chinese audience stated that their government was also democratic. They reminded me that they named their country, The Peoples' Democratic Republic of China. They explained that in China every work group and local organization chooses members who represent their group. These chosen leaders were democratically selected to the next highest level of government to express the needs and directions of those who appointed them. For them, democracy was seen as having its origins starting from ordinary citizens and working its way upward to the next highest level of government officials, and ultimately to The People's National Congress. They also pointed out that in Canada's multi-party, first past the post system, the winning party might have as little as 35% of the popular vote but have up to 60% or more of the members in parliament.

In Canada, many believe that the best way to practice democracy is to vote at elections. Certainly voting is an important part of Canadian democracy, but for humanists, there is more involved in practicing democracy than voting.

The ethic underlying a good democracy is that the opinions of each citizen are valued equally and all votes count equally. Whether one is rich or poor, formally educated, or not, in a democracy, ideas will be judged on their own merits. One's personal value will be determined largely by the fact that each citizen is an equal fellow human being.

Whether one is physically disadvantaged or physically healthy, or is wise or otherwise, or has a job or is unemployed, or has social influence or lacks influence, each vote at the ballot box will count the same as every other Canadian's vote.

The great leveler for all of us is that we are all human. In that sense we are all of equal democratic worth. It is our belief in a common humanity that unites us.

In order to fulfill such a humanist ethical philosophy we will be required to stretch our feelings of compassion and inclusiveness to those around us. This includes our family members, our fellow workers, and those whom we meet daily. For example, we ought to regard our newly arrived refugees as people who share their humanity with us and us with them.

As humanists we will try our best to accept others as fellow human beings. If someone acts badly and harms others it may sometimes be necessary to constrain them in a prison so that they will not be allowed to hurt other humans. In the worst cases such as murder, harmful citizens may have to be confined for long periods of time. Humanists would prefer to limit criminals' freedom rather than have them executed unless there is no other method to prevent them from committing heinous crimes against their fellow humans. Only as a last resort would humanists want even the worst among us to be executed.

As a humanist we will try not to judge people by their age, their sex and sexual orientation, their religious preferences, their ethnic origins, or their social status. Will this be easy? No, it will not. It will require much more than voting at election time as important as that is in a democratic society. It is their humanness that makes their life important and worthwhile.

Bullying, violence, hurtful comments and unfairness to others will indicate that the perpetrators are not respecting the equality of their fellow citizens. They will not be acting or thinking in an ethically democratic manner. While voting is an important part of democracy, respect for the dignity and equality and humanness for all our citizens is also important to the success of a wholesome democracy. In conclusion, "humanists uphold the broadest application of democratic principles in human relationships."