

The Evolutionary Activist

A Series

Booklet X:

Creating Together: Learning Democracy

DRAFT

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About the Series

The opportunity for conscious participation in the evolution of our culture and society is still fairly new to humanity. Beginning about a century and a half ago, there has become visible a growing wave of individuals thinking in new ways, people challenging status quos, and progressive movements of many kinds. However, few people have recognized the deeper wave: a new stage of evolution on our planet. Even fewer have considered how we can learn to get ahead of the wave, to ride it, and even to help steer it in a direction more supportive of human development and a sustainable relationship with the environment.

The Evolutionary Activist is a series of booklets intended to help open a bit more widely the door to this opportunity for conscious evolution at the personal and community level. Each booklet in the series focuses on something we need to know, or be able to do, in order to actively and constructively participate in this process.

We don't know whether it is inevitable that we will make the shift from unconscious to conscious evolution, or whether it is something that depends entirely on some combination of effort and "luck." In either case, we do appear to have a choice.

Introduction

What should we have for dinner? How should the neighborhood respond to a proposed road expansion? What should the city spend money on? What should be our plan to address climate change? What kind of education system should we have? What is our desired vision for the year 2050? All of these questions involve decisions to be made. Who should make them, and how? Today, many people would say that some of these decisions should be made democratically. But what does that mean?

If we take apart the word “democracy,” it becomes clear that it is one of those words whose dictionary definition can’t be absolute. The word’s meaning really depends on the experiences, values and beliefs that we bring to it. First, the “demo-” part. This comes from the Greek word *demos*, which means “the people.” But who, or what, is “the people”? Is it just everyone eligible to vote? Is it a crowd making personal decisions multiplied millions of times? Or could it be something more?

The second root of the word “democracy” is *cratos*. In Greek, this means something like “power.” But what is “power”? Is it the same thing as control or force? Is it something of which there is a finite amount, something that can be given and taken? Is it simply the ability of people to cast votes for candidate A or B? Or is there more to it?

What if the way we define “the people” depends on how we are organized and relate to each other? What if “the people” could be more than just a crowd? What if “power” could be thought of not as mere control or force, not as a limited thing to be taken or given, but something that involves creativity, something that exists only so long as it is *grown*, and something that can keep growing so long as we are working together to create possibilities?

Thinking more along these lines, democracy could be defined as *a way of life through which people create and act upon a will in common*. And from the standpoint of conscious evolution, developing our ability to do this is essential.

Making Decisions...and Shaping Future Decisions

Every day, individuals, groups, and societies face situations that require decisions. Some are immediate decisions with immediate effects. These kinds of decisions don't seem to involve a lot of options, nor are they usually difficult to make. Routines and patterns in place usually dictate the decision. And *emergency* decisions typically fall to one person.

Also every day, individuals, groups, and societies have opportunities to shape the situations they will face in the future. These opportunities involve decisions of a different kind—decisions whose effects *persist* and shape shorter-term options and choices.

Who Decides?

Who gets to make the more important, more impactful kinds of decisions can vary widely:

- All of the decisions in a given group or level of community or society might be made by one person (a military commander, a boss, a king, a dictator).
- Decisions might be made by people with certain characteristics or privileges (e.g., rich people; white people; men; assertive people; adults; elders; etc.)
- Decisions might be made by those selected by a wider group (e.g., elected representatives and leaders in a constitutional republic, or in a student government).
- Everyone affected might be invited into the process of making the decision (e.g., through asking the public for their opinions, through people voting directly on issues, or through some broader kind of participatory democracy).

Decisions: Much more than "A or B"

The activity of "making decisions" is much broader than just choosing person A or B, or choosing path A or B:

- Choices require *options*. Options might be pre-existing and limited by a situation, or they might be created. If created, how are they created? Who creates them?
- Options imply a need for *solutions*. Solutions imply *problems*. Who identifies the problems? Who defines them? And how?
- Sometimes a group or community adopts a *vision*—an expression of a desired future state—to help guide its goals, policies, and designs. Who gets to create the vision for a neighborhood or a company, a city or a nation?

- Related to visions are *goals* and *designs*. Who sets the goals? Who gets to design a social system?

Why Democracy?

When it comes to making important decisions (and devising solutions, creating options, visions, and designs), there are good reasons for involving more people:

1. More people can bring more information, knowledge, and wisdom, which may lead to a better decision.
2. Interaction among more people, with more diverse knowledge or backgrounds, can trigger insights and ideas that were not otherwise evident.
3. When people are involved in decisions that affect them and those they care about, they will tend to provide more long-term support for the decision.
4. It is simply more respectful to those who are affected by the decision.

Democracy isn't new, but its best days may lie ahead

Examples of shared decision making can be found throughout history, in all parts of the world, including but certainly not limited to:

- the well-known example of ancient Athens, the Greek city-state, in which the people (or at least adult male property-owners) gathered to make collective decisions;
- public elections in the Italian republics of the later Middle Ages;
- the Islamic tradition of *shura*, which requires consulting and deliberating with those affected by decisions;
- the Iroquois Confederacy (or Haudenosaunee), founded over 500 years ago, whose Great Law of Peace was essentially a constitution that described how decisions would be made peacefully and by consensus;
- the practice of the Quakers, who for 350 years have used a process of decision-making that involves giving everyone voice and generally seeking consensus; and
- the famous open town meetings of New England.

We should be inspired by, and can learn from, all of the various democratic practices from across history and across cultures. At this time in history, we have both the opportunity and the need to do so. But what we are working for today will be more inclusive, and at a much larger scale, than any form of democracy seen in human history.

More People, or More Perspectives?

In reality, obtaining the benefits of democracy isn't always just a matter of *more people* being involved. Bringing in *more diversity of perspectives* may be even more important, and that may not require *everyone* being involved. For example, let's say a city wants to know what its residents think are the most important issues to address, and it sends out a lot of surveys to get this information. Thousands of surveys coming back would mean more people's viewpoints coming in. But if the surveys are only being filled out by people who are inclined to fill them out, or if the surveys are in a language that a large number of people in the city don't use at home, then the results will be incomplete and decisions based on it may not benefit everyone. It might be more effective to put together a well-facilitated "focus group" that includes representatives from every sector of the community.

The question of whether it is essential to involve *more people* or simply *more diverse perspectives* (or *both*) depends on the situation. Maybe in some cases the buy-in (support) of everyone affected is really important. In other cases, perhaps just having a diversity of perspectives captures the benefits of greater inclusion.

Sometimes *scale* will be a factor in determining the best way to capture the value of democratic participation. It may be easy to gather everyone in a village, small town, school or workplace to participate in a decision, whereas getting everyone in a city, nation, or planet into a decision-making process is much harder to organize.

Let's consider some different contexts and whether democracy (broadly defined as *creating and acting upon a will in common*) might make sense in each.

Situation/ Context	Is democracy desirable in this context?	Is the value of democracy captured better by including more people, more diversity, or both?	Current obstacles to effective democracy in this situation
A family deciding what to do on the weekend.	Maybe. It could reveal genuine interests, be a learning moment about both leisure	Both. There is no difference between "more people" and "more diversity" at this scale.	Difference in maturity and experience levels is very wide.

	opportunities <i>and</i> how people can make decisions together, help foster communication skills, and help grow respect.		Absence of experience with, or spirit of, shared decision-making in many/most families in most cultures.
A life-or-death medical decision in an emergency room.	No. It's too slow and probably not helpful.	More diversity.	Very few have the knowledge needed to make the decision. Not enough time.
A school addressing a problem with bullying.	Yes. Everyone is affected and can help; the extent of the problem can become clearer with mass participation, better solutions generated, and everyone could feel more buy-in to solutions.	Both, but <i>more people</i> may be more weighty. Even one person could make a major difference, so more people = higher chances of success. That said, a wider range of backgrounds alone could pinpoint causes & factors.	Schools don't typically seek the insights and voluntary participation of an entire student body to address school issues.
Setting a national strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.	Maybe. Everyone is affected and influences the problem; it could result in better ideas and would definitely result in more buy-in.	Both. From a diversity perspective, there are distinct interests to bring to the table to get the "full picture." From a numbers perspective, everyone is part of the problem and can help to be part of the solution	Lack of knowledge among most people about this subject. Lack of structures & processes for this scale of participation.

		if involved in the policy-making.	
Redesigning a justice system.	Yes. Everyone is affected, and nearly everyone can speak to what kind of society they want & what justice means. Broad participation helps ensure that the system reflects the values and aspirations of the entire community and responds to its needs.	Both, but <i>more diversity</i> may be more weighty. A <i>broader</i> cross-section of people could capture most of the likely diversity of experiences and backgrounds, aspirations and needs needed for designing the system. <i>Deeper</i> participation (more people) would help ensure diversity and expand experience with “participatory design”.	Nearly universal lack of experience in the practice of designing social systems, let alone in an inclusive way.

Mistrust of Democracy

While democracy is generally spoken of in virtuous terms, there is also widespread mistrust in the idea of democracy. This is both understandable and based on misunderstanding and lack of experience (or bad experience). Mistrust in democracy was probably present as far back as ancient Athens, one of the birthplaces of direct democracy. It can be rooted in a lack of faith in most people’s ability to have well-informed viewpoints. Perhaps it is rooted in a lack of faith in one’s *own* ability to have well-informed viewpoints. It could be based in a lack of trust in institutions to carry out the “will of the people” (betrayal of that trust has been common). Another concern is the notion that democracy = majority rule, and majority rule = tyranny of the majority. If you’re often in the minority on decisions, that would be an understandable conclusion.

As we have begun exploring in this booklet, meaningful democracy is about creating and acting upon a will in common, and does not necessarily involve “majorities” at all. It does

involve gaining experience in feeling involved, in listening, in speaking, in feeling heard, and various other aspects of creating together. It has to be learned from the ground up and institutionalized from the bottom up.

Moving from Passive to Active

We usually think of *governing* as something fairly distant from our daily lives—something done by an institution that runs itself. Yet even if it does feel distant, we still like the idea that the governing is done with our consent. That is, we like the feeling that the decisions are not forced on us. And in American society (among others), if we can just choose (by majority vote) the people making these decisions (or if we at least have the freedom to do so), we think we have fulfilled the idea of government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Even if we don’t do anything to be involved in this indirect, consent-based process, there is a widespread perception that since we have the *right* to do it, we are “free.” And this indirect connection to the governing process, facilitated by majority rule, along with rights like freedom of speech and freedom of assembly (to gather with who we want, when and where we want), is what most people call “democracy.” But consider these words of Mary Parker Follett, writing 100 years ago:

We have not yet tried democracy. Party or ‘interests’ govern us with some fiction of the ‘consent of the governed’ which we say means democracy. We have not even a conception of what democracy means.

Mary Parker Follett, *The New State*

Follett went on to say that the things we usually associate with democracy—such as majority rule—by themselves fail to release the true potential of society and the individuals who make it up. Her understanding and vision of democracy, which was informed by her work in neighborhoods and with local government and industry, was based on **creating together**. From that standpoint, it seems clear that even now, 100 years later, we’ve only scratched the surface of what democracy could mean.

Passive vs. Active

Participatory democracy can’t be a spectator sport. It requires that people take an active role in the collective direction of their society. This is clearly not the case today, where the vast majority of people—at almost every level from the household to the world—are content to allow a self-selected few to make almost every decision. If we do vote, we tend

to vote (as Follett pointed out) for parties or interests rather than on the basis of “who will release the creative potential of the people?”

Most people today play a fairly *passive* role in the decision-making of their communities and their society. What, then, would *active* participation look like? Our culture says that to vote in elections is the defining factor. As important as this can be, it is only one act, and by itself it cannot fulfill the potential of democracy. If we hold the vision of democracy as *people creating and acting upon a will in common*, then the following would seem to be the markers of an active citizenship:

- at a *minimum*, it means being aware that you affect the direction of a group, a community, a society, and a species whether you consciously do anything to affect it or not;
- it surely includes accepting your responsibility *to* and *with* (but not necessarily *for*) other;
- questioning things, both privately and publicly, even when doing so could make one vulnerable;
- learning about issues, needs, and problems;
- engaging in conversation with others (and not just the like-minded) about *what should be*;
- calling out inequities and injustices, holding space for the words, experiences, ideas, and participation of others (whether individuals or entire groups);
- stepping forth with initiative and courage when the need arises (accepting situational leadership), and encouraging and allowing others to do the same; and
- teaching other people to do all of the above, first by example, second by guidance.

Moving democracy from a passive form to an active form will allow us to move from mere *consent* of the governed (we voluntarily go along with what the governors decide) toward *consensus* of the governed (we come to agreements as a community). We can even achieve *creativity* of the governed (we together create that which we come to agreement on).

Choosing Among Options vs. Creating Options

One of the biggest weaknesses of the dominant concept of democracy is that it is focused on merely selecting from among very few, pre-digested choices. This is true of both the selection of candidates for public office (usually one person from one of very few dominant organizations called “parties”), and of opportunities to choose courses of

action, policies, etc. through direct vote. Skipping over the process of dialogue and deliberation prevents our decision-making process from being proactive, vision-driven, or creative.

Democracy: Form of Government vs. Way of Life

Winston Churchill, who was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during World War II, famously reflected that

[I]t has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time...

For people in more and more countries today, democracy is an idea embedded in the way of governing. Regardless of how it takes form in our formal governing, however, the potential of democracy is unfulfilled if it is not also *a way of life based on creating together*. And if it is to be a way of life, it is not something that would be found in national and state capitols, but rather would be found in the daily spaces we inhabit and situations that all of us encounter.

Of course, there are only certain forms of government that are truly compatible with democracy as a way of life. These include the constitutional republics and parliamentary-based governments around the world. The best examples of these use free and fair elections to choose representatives and fill positions of leadership, allow at least most adults to vote, and protect most basic rights. As we move downward in scale in many of these countries, we find equivalent institutions at regional and local levels. We have no experience with forms of government at the other end of the scale—the global—but if that ever happens, presumably it would take the same principles to the ultimate level.

Which needs to come first—democracy as a way of life or forms of government that allow (if not active encourage) a democratic way of life? There is a good argument to be made that democracy-tolerant governments need to come first. On the other hand, once the way of life emerges, it could shape the evolution of the form of government.

Doing Democracy: Beyond Voting

Voting and Its Limitations

Voting is a very common method for groups and communities to make choices, when a whole group of people is being asked to decide on something. By itself there is nothing wrong with voting as a procedure, but it can have these major limitations as a way of making decisions together:

1. Voting is often undertaken without having been preceded by dialogue, deliberation, and creativity. Let's say a simple community vote is taken on whether to approve the budget to build a new library. If the vote is being taken without sufficient dialogue, deliberation, and opportunity for creativity, the community doesn't really know what its full range of options could have been. The community may not know what the library budget looks like in the context of the total budget, which could change people's feelings about it. There might have been little opportunity for reasoned debate over the merits of voting yes versus voting no.
2. Voting is often done by simple majority. In a simple majority vote, 51% wins, 49% loses, and that's it. This sends a clear message to the group or society members that choices are basically a matter of sheer *force of numbers*, that quantity is more important than quality. It suggests that the only candidates or ideas that matter are the ones that win, and if they don't win, they can be ignored, at least until the next vote. This thinking is obviously mistaken. The perspectives, needs, or preferences of the "losing side" — which may be as many as half the voting group — do not go away. And if ignored, they are wasted. This can turn into cynicism, resentment, and division. Moreover, the value of the diversity of perspectives is not captured.
3. Voting often assumes everyone has equal access to information about the issue, candidates, or question at hand. This is often not the case.
4. Voting assumes that the voting process is free and fair and inclusive. This is not a safe assumption in all cases. Even in modern republics with generally fair elections, there are questions about certain segments of the population being excluded from the voting process, either by law (e.g., people under the age of 18, people convicted of felonies) or in more subtle ways (e.g., the exclusion of lower-income and minority groups).
5. There is often no minimum requirement for level of participation. Some countries and states have minimums, others don't. Regardless, what if "voter turnout" is only 50%? What about 20%? Does the result represent the "will of the people"? One could argue that even if only 5% of eligible voters turn out to vote, the result is "valid" because what counts is the will of those who cared to vote. But if so many people didn't think that the choices being offered made a difference, what was the point of holding a vote at all? In these cases, voting as a democratic process is a mockery of the spirit of democracy.

As an alternative, voting can be seen and used as one step in a broader process of finding consensus. Consensus means broad agreement on something (it doesn't have to be 100% agreement). Consensus can only be achieved if everyone's perspective is authentically respected, and ways are explored and invented that meet the needs, concerns, and aspirations of everyone involved. It takes longer to get greater consensus, but it is often worth the time and effort.

Juries and the Requirement for Unanimity

It is worth noting that in a society that relies so much on majority vote, we have one setting where we require unanimity in decisions: jury trials in federal courts and in criminal trials in most states. Presumably the thought behind this is that a verdict about innocence or guilt is too important to leave to anything less than 100% agreement, which means that the evidence must be strong enough to convince everyone, and/or the deliberation within the jury has to be of high-enough quality to convince everyone. Along the way to their verdict, juries often take informal "straw polls" to gauge where the group is in their thinking. Imagine if other contexts in which we vote to make life-altering decisions were held to the same standard that juries are held to!

An Examples of Process in Small Group Democracy

To highlight an example of an "enhanced" ways of doing democracy at small scales, let's look at a process with the (definitely not self-explanatory) name of Nominal Group Technique (NGT). Imagine a group that has gathered to come up with ideas for how to address the issue of affordable housing. In NGT, the group takes these steps:

1. Each person writes down their ideas.
2. Everyone takes a turn sharing one of their ideas with the group, explaining it and answering questions for clarity. No judgment is made.
3. The sharing goes around and around the group ("round robin") until all ideas are expressed. Participants can add ideas to their list at any time, as hearing other people's ideas may stimulate their own thinking.
4. Group members are asked to initially rank the ideas, which helps to prioritize them. They may be asked to explain why they ranked them as they did.
5. This is followed by more discussion about the remaining ideas before a final selection is made.

Nominal Group Technique is an example of good democratic process because (a) it helps to ensure that everyone has a voice, (b) it helps to make sure that the group has explored a

wide range of possible ideas, and (c) it provides opportunity for people to explain their thinking. Processes like this can be enhanced further by having the group come to agreement on the basis they will use for evaluating ideas. It has been found that when people do that first, they tend to unite more readily behind the final choice.

Questions to Keep in Mind for Doing Democracy Well

Democracy can be shifted from a hands-off, divisive, procedure-driven process that puts decisions in the hands of a few to a process that is more inclusive, unifying, creative, educational, and effective if we put consideration into the following questions:

- How are issues framed? How are they prioritized? Who does this?
- Framing the questions: how is it done and who does it?
- How do we ensure that participation represents the range of perspectives of all those affected by the decision?
- Is enough background information available to the group making the decision? Has it been made available to the public in a way that is useful and empowering?
- How are alternatives identified? Has there been time and process to allow for creativity, for win-win solutions?
- Is there provision for dialogue, deliberation, and debate before decisions are made about action? (see Conversation for Democracy below)
- Is there opportunity for people to change their minds?
- Are the processes being used to explore issues, create visions, make policies or choose alternatives equitable and inclusive?
- Is there adequate skill in facilitation available to support the processes?
- What thought is being given to *trust*?
- Is there a way to record or otherwise capture the essence of dialogue and deliberations, so that the community can include it in a knowledge base and refer to it in the future, if needed?
- Is it essential to have everyone participate in the decision, or is the representation of *diversity of perspectives* sufficient?
- Is it really enough to have a simple majority dominate the choice or should a higher standard be required? Are there situations in which 100% agreement (or close to it) be the standard?
- Is thought being put into which decisions require input based on *knowledge* vs. the kinds of input into decisions that are based on *values and aspirations*?

- What is the role of “experts” in the process? Is specialized knowledge required, and where does it need to be applied?
- Is the context of discussion of the issue (the “bigger picture”) broad enough to help people make the wisest choice?
- Is there any provision for reflecting upon the processes, and on learning from experience?
- Is “educating for democracy” being done before, during, and after decision-making? That is, are people (including children) learning the values, attitudes, dispositions, and skills needed to create and act upon a will in common together?

Democracy is Learned (or Not)

We’ve been focusing here on democracy less as a system of government and more as a way of life in which we create and act upon a will in common. All too often, however, see in our shared spaces the attitudes and behaviors that are *not* conducive to creating together with others, such as:

- people trying to dominate others, either by volume of voice or ability to debate;
- a tendency to focus too early on coming to agreement, combined with a lack of faith in finding consensus;
- a discomfort with conflict due to confusing conflict with violence;
- a view that individual perspectives (including our own) are “mere opinions,” and thus don’t need any support or reasoning behind them;
- an unwillingness to say things that might be unpopular or which might put one’s ego, image, or standing in the community at risk;
- an overwhelming urge to speak rather than to listen; and
- too much deference given to people in positions of authority or other forms of privilege, out of fear or simple acceptance that “that’s the way it is.”

The problems caused by the above all are compounded by the fact that our *processes* of decision-making, and our expectations of *leadership*, are not yet conducive to democratic creativity. We will touch on those later.

The values, attitudes, dispositions, and skills for democracy—for creating a will in common—are not genetically inherited, and they are not automatic. They have to be learned. And in order to really have a chance at taking root, this learning needs to take place in settings where we have our *formative* experiences—the experiences that

shape us. This includes our homes, neighborhoods, schools, organizations we belong to, workplaces, and city halls.

Values

Values are the qualities that we hold to be important for both ourselves and our society.

Values needed for democracy would seem to have to include:

- freedom;
- recognition of mutual inter-dependence;
- responsibility;
- transparency;
- equity;
- justice; and
- a belief in progress (i.e., the journey is not over).

These values have been the subject of discussion in all communities and societies, and that discussion has been ramping up over the past century, past decades, and even just the past few years.

Attitudes & Dispositions

The attitudes and dispositions well-suited to allowing people to create a will in common with others would seem to include the following:

- an attitude of respect (for both self and others)
- a sense of responsibility (to and with others)
- honesty
- integrity (doing what you say, saying what you do)
- openness to learning
- optimism
- faith in humanity
- patience
- tolerance of ambiguity
- courage
- empathy
- curiosity
- flexibility
- willingness to imagine
- humility
- conviction

Skills

The skills that people need in order to create a will in common with others would seem to include the following:

- listening (the active kind, which includes showing others that you're listening)
- taking turns
- communication skills (in both spoken and written form)
- being able to frame questions
- critical thinking (can I trust what I'm seeing, hearing, reading, believing?)
- being able to recognize and question assumptions
- reflective thinking
- research (the kind that involves finding and using credible and diverse sources of information)
- being able to find the grains of truth in others' views
- non-violent communication (being able to express ones wants and needs in ways that don't involve attacking others or making them feel attacked)
- mediating (helping turn conflict among others into creativity)
- helping others do the above (a bonus skill)

Many of the qualities listed above are the qualities we should be looking for in leaders as well as among the general public. Actually, it could be said that good leadership and good "followership" are very much alike. Unlike on a battlefield, being a good follower in a democracy doesn't imply obedience and conformity.

Everyone is different, and we do inherit certain pre-dispositions. However, everyone can learn and cultivate the values, attitudes, and dispositions needed for meaningful, participatory democracy. If we want our society to evolve in that direction, then we have to provide formative experiences in democracy in our local and everyday settings. How to do that in our homes, neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces is a critical question and a great challenge for evolutionary activism.

Unfortunately, in most homes, schools, neighborhoods, workplaces and many clubs or other organizations we might belong to, democracy is not to be found. Decisions are usually made either by procedures, by strong personalities, or by those in positions of authority. Occasionally a wider group of people is asked to give an opinion on something, perhaps through a survey. Sometimes community planners use invite feedback from residents about proposed designs. Once in a while we may find an opportunity to choose a "yes" or a "no" through a majority vote. And, of course, there are elections through which representatives are chosen for neighborhood associations on upwards.

A culture of democracy has to be created and learned simultaneously. The culture has to provide opportunities and experiences. The experiences then reinforce the culture. We learn through experiences. Some possible avenues for strengthening the learning of the values, attitudes, and skills needed for democracy as a way of life are explored next.

True Civic Education

The Idaho Constitution asserts the following:

The stability of a republican form of government depending mainly upon the intelligence of the people, it shall be the duty of the legislature of Idaho, to establish and maintain a general, uniform and thorough system of public, free common schools.

Idaho law goes on to say

A thorough system of public schools in Idaho is one in which...The importance of students acquiring the skills to enable them to be responsible citizens of their homes, schools and communities is emphasized. (Idaho Code 33-1612)

Unfortunately, “civic education” in Idaho, and in many other places, is generally limited to learning about the history of one’s country and about the mechanics of government. Is it reasonable to think that after being educated in what is essentially a totalitarian education system, and not being involved in community decisions, that young people turning 18 and are magically civically-engaged citizens, ready to create together?

True civic education would provide opportunities to learn and practice the values, attitudes, dispositions, and skills needed for creating and acting upon a will in common throughout a student’s entire educational experience, from kindergarten level upwards.

Realistic and powerful opportunities at every age level could include:

- allowing students to create classroom rules and to solve problems as a group;
- having regular group dialogues, discussions, and debates;
- having a real role in school governance and policy-making about everything from discipline to recycling to school lunches to educational models and methods;
- engaging students in addressing problems and opportunities in the communities around them.

There are many ideas about how to improve civic education, but few focus on actually building the capacity of students to create and act upon a will in common at the personal, inter-personal, and trans-personal (community/society) levels.

Since schools usually exist within neighborhoods and are a shared institution for neighbors, they offer the potential to serve as centers for fostering democracy at the neighborhood level, which is discussed next.

Neighborhoods as a Kindergarten of Democracy

Neighborhoods (and small towns and villages, in other contexts) are the most local spaces where we begin to share common concerns and opportunities with people outside of our families. They thus represent great potential settings for learning how to create and act upon a will in common. Neighborhood associations (not to be confused with homeowner associations) are often formed to mobilize neighbors around a particular issue. But if their missions could be expanded to include fostering opportunities for dialogue and deliberation, their significance could expand beyond the “reactive.”

Neighborhood groups taking on the role of educating for democracy could help to demonstrate the capacity of neighborhoods to serve as settings for inclusive, innovative, and wiser decision-making and thus grow true power from the bottom upwards. Through that organic growth, city governments (who sometimes mistrust or fear neighborhood-level groups) might come to see themselves as the means through which neighborhoods create and act upon a will in common at a higher level of inter-dependence.

Cities who care about meaningful participation should offer assistance to this level of community as a way to grow a culture of democracy.

City Halls as “Agoras”

In ancient Athens, the *agora* was the open space where people would gather to discuss the issues of the day. City halls can offer this again today. First, however, they need to shift their cultures from one of superficial consultation to one of authentic inclusion. Their physical orientations would need to change as well, from arrangements where the center of attention is a *dais* where council members sit above others and toward circular arrangements (think King Arthur’s round table) designed to foster dialogue among all stakeholders.

Modern agoras would need to include physical spaces designed for inclusive and creative interaction and online spaces with the same qualities (social media presently lack the contextual supports needed for meaningful dialogue and decision-making). They would need to include tools and processes in both kinds of settings that *inform and engage* residents in meaningful and empowering ways about issues, *engage* people in all of the

forms of conversation needed for democracy, and *build the capacities* for democracy in general.

While government often seems “far away” to people, local government is closest to individual citizens and thus represents a special opportunity. Local governments can help support a culture of democracy by creating opportunities, processes, and spaces for that purpose. Local government officials inclined toward transformational leadership (see *Leadership for Democracy* below) could be assisting neighborhoods to become crucibles of democratic capacity (see earlier section).

Parenting for Democracy

Learning how to foster in one’s own family the attitudes, dispositions, and skills needed for democratic interaction would be very complementary to other kinds of development of parenting skills, such as having a good working relationship with children, creating positive expectations, reducing conflict, etc. Learning democracy in the home is very different from learning democracy in other settings because there is a large difference in maturity and experience between parents and children. It is not necessarily about deciding things together but certainly would include fundamental things like modeling respect, active listening and dialogue, then perhaps learning to set priorities together, and creating ideas together. As children mature, families can move toward equity and a greater role in more decisions, which fits with the developmental tendencies of teenagers anyway.

A good example of an approach to parenting for democracy is the approach called Positive Discipline and a related model of education, developed by Ray Corsini, called the “4R’s”. Both are based on the philosophy of psychologist Alfred Adler. Positive Discipline is focused on mutual respect and solution-finding rather than on rewards and punishments. Corsini’s “4R’s” are:

- Respect (children learn respect by being respected);
- Responsibility (children learn to become responsible by being allowed to take responsibility);
- Resourcefulness (children learn to be resourceful by being allowed to solve their own problems); and
- Responsiveness (learning to be responsive to the needs of self, others, and situations).

The 4R's were designed as part of a meaningful approach to democratic education where children are able to guide their own advancement through a curriculum. But equally important to the academic part of that model are the social and creative aspects of child development.

Democracy in the Workplace?

What place could democracy realistically or usefully have in workplaces like a restaurant, a nursing home, or a corporate office? It may not be the kind of democracy you would see in a neighborhood meeting or a school. It may not even involve meetings and deliberations (although in places where unions are still active, this may be part of how wages and benefits are decided upon). Opportunities for learning and practicing democracy in the workplace would begin with a culture of respect for employees, meaningful opportunities for them to be heard, and processes that acknowledge that workers have special knowledge and unique perspectives that can help the enterprise as a whole work better.

Conversation for Democracy

A friend of mine named Alexander Christakis, who has dedicated his life to helping groups work democratically in dealing with complex issues, once wrote that meaningful democracy requires something else with Greek roots: *syzitisis* (pronounced "si'ZI'ti'sis"). This means "searching together through conversation." This is very different from debate, whose roots mean "to fight over."

Our society presently values debate over other forms of conversation about public issues, and our experience of democracy suffers as a result. We have debate clubs in high schools, but no dialogue clubs. Even where we'd like a good debate, as between presidential candidates, we rarely get it. Skillful debate has its place in creating and acting upon a will in common, but it needs to make way for other kinds of interaction.

It is useful to distinguish four kinds of conversation—let's call them the Four D's—that have different roles in democracy as a way of life:

D Word	Root Meaning	Place in Democratic Experience
dialogue	“flow of meaning”	Understanding each other, exploring assumptions, finding common ground
discussion	“to shake apart”	When we are getting a handle on a situation, sharing concerns, needs, desires, and ideas
deliberation	“to weigh out”	When we are considering how to evaluate options and choose paths forward, weigh pros and cons and trade-offs,
debate	“to fight over”	When a choice needs to be made among alternatives that have been defined during discussion and deliberation, debate can help clarify the difference, with advocates for different choices bringing to bear their experience, knowledge and wisdom.

Scaling It Up: The Problem of Keeping Democracy Horizontal

Elusive though it may seem, it is easier to imagine participatory democracy at a smaller scale like a neighborhood or small town than it is at the scale of a larger city, let alone a state, nation, or planet. We assume that it becomes necessary to delegate the decision-making activity to representatives at higher levels (i.e., wider spheres). In theory, we can visit, call, or write to our representative and they hear our opinions and take them into account as they deliberate with their fellow representatives. And certainly, we should do so. Unfortunately, under this present system, the vast majority of people tend to be disengaged from the discussion, dialogue, and deliberation (which is not available to them anyway). The representative is often a member of a party and thus is driven as much by an ideology and a “platform” as by ideas shared by citizens. They are also driven in large part by their desire to be re-elected, which discourages political courage and also gives political campaign donors get a seat closer to the table.

There is no clear way to get around the issue of scale and having to delegate governance “upwards.” However, we do have some experience with alternative methods, and others have been proposed:

- One common way of doing so-called *direct democracy* with large numbers of people is through the use of referendums. On a large scale, this means the voters voting

on an issue. For example, the people of the United Kingdom voted in 2016 (by the close margin of 52% to 48%) to remove the UK from the European Union.

(Sometimes citizens can place an issue on the ballot themselves. That process is called an *initiative*, but it is usually made to be very difficult to do). The limitation of referendums is the same as that of any approach to democracy designed around voting: it too often skips over the dialogue, deliberation, and creativity that could end up creating better ideas than the alternatives placed on the ballot.

- Another approach some have proposed is creating panels from among randomly-selected citizens. Those “ordinary citizens” would deliberate about issues and make decisions or recommendations. People would take turns serving on such panels. A variation on this is to create panels by selecting people who represent diverse perspectives.
- Another approach that has been tested successfully is called deliberative polling, a process invented by Robert Fishkin. It combines polling (surveying) people about an issue, selecting a random sample of those polled to participate in groups who study the issue, ask questions of experts, and discuss the issue in small groups. They then do another poll that captures their newly-informed opinions. The results of that are better than just a broad poll, so theoretically can be fed into formal decision-making.

There is clearly much room for innovation in how we scale up democracy, and these can be implemented today. However, I hope the case has been made throughout this booklet that the benefits of new *systems and tools* for democracy will be limited if democracy does not become a way of life, defined by our capacity to create together. We need to lay the groundwork at the ultra-local and levels, then grow outwards and upwards through the layers and spheres of inter-dependence that connect us all.

There are many examples of failure from trying to create install frameworks of shared decision-making from the top-down. For example, the League of Nations after World War I, and “Brexit,” which was mentioned earlier. When people don’t directly experience the creation of a will in common in their localized contexts, they will be less inclined to understand the value of it at higher levels. And the less of a voice they have in designing a system, the less loyalty they will have to it.

Someday we may grow some kind of planetary governance framework, a federation of nations that is like a federation of states, but working at the level of global inter-dependence. Right now, “globalism” is a bad word for many because the only truly global

governance is done by international corporations, most of whom have their agendas centered around profit and self-perpetuation. Global, or planetary, governance is a long way off from being grown organically, from the bottom up. But we have an urgent need to foster that growth.

Leadership for Democracy: Transformational and Situational

If we accept that democracy is about the people creating and acting upon a will in common, then our concepts of leadership and the role of leaders necessarily changes. Today, we tend to define leadership as the ability to get other people to do something. It is often based on personality and charisma. People seeking positions of leadership are also expected to lay out a plan, a vision, and make promises about getting there. That kind of leadership is not what participatory democracy, and democracy as a way of life, really needs.

What we're looking for in people who would lead, and what we are *growing* as we learn democracy, is what some call *transformational* leadership. This kind of leadership is focused on releasing the creative potential of the people. It is leadership that sets an example of working constructively. It is leadership that educates and facilitates. There can still be room for the *passion* that we like in leadership, but this passion we need is about helping people solve their own problems, rather than on relying on "the leader" to do it for them.

We are also opening space for *situational* leadership. A democratic community or society is a *leaderful* community or society, because many more people will find themselves in situations where their unique strengths or insights or skills are allowed to come forth and shine. Situational leadership is not found in formal positions or titles. Situational leaders are not elected.

Summary

- Our communities and societies have many decisions to make that affect many people. Making decisions broadly includes identifying and creating options, visions and designs, in addition to making near-term choices, making policies, and choosing leaders.
- We can best release the potential of individuals, communities, and societies if we create our options and make our decisions together.

- Democracy is more importantly a way of life than a form of government. There are a variety of forms of government that are compatible with democracy, but all have limited potential if democracy is not a way of life.
- The idea of democracy as “majority rule” fails to capture its true potential. Democracy can be defined in a most empowering way as **a way of life through which self-determined people create and act upon a will in common.**
- Democratic practices have a long and global history, but democracy takes a lot of work to sustain and we have a long way to go to realize its true promise.
- There are many forms of democratic process, or "ways it can be done", but in all cases, meaningful democracy includes meaningful conversation, participation by those affected, and the creation of possibilities.
- Democracy has to be learned by individuals through experiences of creating with others with whom we share a situation, need, or opportunity. These experiences can foster the attitudes, dispositions, and skills needed for growing democracy from the bottom up and the inside out.
- Democracy can and should be learned in the settings and spaces we grow up in and inhabit every day: homes, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and more. In order for that to happen, the social arrangements within these spaces need to shift in order to support the conditions for democratic experience.
- Learning democracy should be a focus of evolutionary activism because it is a condition for enabling the conscious evolution of culture and society in ways that are inclusive, positive, powerful, and lasting.

Connection to Other Booklets in the Series

- Dialogue: The Key (Booklet ___)
- Designing Social Systems Together (Booklet ___)
- Transformational Leadership (Booklet ___)