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[Updated title: “The Experiential Democracy Project: A Depth Approach to the Legislative Process”]

Kirk J. Schneider, Ph.D.

Our legislative process is disabled. It seems that “voting one’s conscience,” a core of the democratic spirit of deliberation, has too often given way to voting to stay elected, or to appease vested interests, or to attain the “quick-fix”—and the results have been all too apparent.

As a psychologist schooled in interpersonal mediation, it was this recognition that spurred me to embark on an ambitious project two years ago: to translate and apply contemporary existential-humanistic psychology’s awe-based principles of presence, freedom, courage, and appreciation to the legislative arena (see also Martin Buber’s idea of “I-Thou” dialogue). The core idea of this Experiential Democracy Project, as I call it, is to supplement the bureaucratically heavy legislative system with a personal or “experiential” component that should, in theory, provide a counterbalance or check to what is now a very one-sided, and too often one-dimensional process.

Experientially-based deliberation – or “experiential democracy” for short – is a “here and now,” personally oriented supplement to standardized legislative proceeding. Put another way, it is an opportunity for intensive reflection about an issue of moral import, and for the maximization of consensus through empathy. Experiential deliberation is not intended to dominate but to supplement governmental decision-making; it is an attempt to ensure integrity, both within and among deliberators. Here’s a brief overview of how an experientially-based legislative proceeding might work.

Two diversely opinionated legislators who are members of the same legislative committee would agree to participate in four facilitated confidential meetings over a one-month period, possibly accompanied by one or two legislator-observers from the same panel. In this media-free meeting the facilitator would present the legislators with one or two morally significant, currently active agenda items that have been agreed to in advance.

The meeting would provide a forum for mindful turn-taking in which each legislator briefly offers his or her personal and heartfelt perspective on the selected agenda item (i.e., “my side of the story”). The opposing legislator would then be asked to reflect back what she/he had just heard, and the counterpart would have a chance to correct any misunderstanding (after which the roles

would be reversed). The interaction would then proceed to a deepening or elaboration of the thoughts and feelings that emerged from this process of mutual disclosure. In particular, each party would be asked to declare the important meanings or understandings that the dialogue has produced, and how or whether their opinions of the legislation have changed as a result.

Finally, each legislator would consider whether an identifiable consensus had been achieved – or what steps would be needed to achieve consensus. A recording secretary or observer would then summarize the deliberations and prepare a written report that focuses solely on conclusions about the specific agenda item and that strictly excludes the disclosure of any personal information about the thoughts or emotions expressed by either party. This report would then be brought to the entire legislative committee for general discussion and integration into further deliberative proceedings. In addition, a brief assessment at the end of the four sessions could be used to help determine the utility and viability of the proposed procedure.

It seems to me that there is a new readiness, and perhaps even a hunger, among constituents for a substantive check on the present mode of political decision-making. I believe we can foster a new dimension in the legislative deliberation process that emphasizes an in-depth, personal component in conjunction with, and as a supplement to, the conventional group deliberation that has prevailed. This would be a natural “next step” in the deepening and enrichment of the democratic process envisioned by our forebears. I therefore hope that experiments like this in “experiential democracy” might be tried on a small and carefully monitored scale throughout the country, with data collected and pooled to determine their effectiveness. I invite anyone who may have legislative contacts to consider whether this idea may be worth exploring with your local or national representatives.

PsySR Member Kirk J. Schneider is a licensed psychologist, vice-president of the Existential-Humanistic Institute, adjunct faculty member at Saybrook Graduate School and the California Institute of Integral Studies, and current editor of the Journal of Humanistic Psychology. Parts of this blog have been excerpted from Kirk’s forthcoming book “Awakening to Awe: Personal Stories of Profound Transformation” (Jason Aronson, September, 2009), and have been sent to a local (Bay Area) legislator, Fiona Ma, California State Assembly Majority Whip, to discuss its implementation. Fiona Ma will be speaking on the subject at the 3rd Annual Existential-Humanistic Institute Conference, November 19, 2009 (see ehinstitute.org for more information). Kirk welcomes your inquiries about his experiential democracy proposal and can be reached through his website, kirkjschneider.com.