E Pluribus Unum - We're in this together

When this country was just setting up shop, our founding fathers, the ruling elite, spoke in glowing terms of a new nation. They spoke English, but their formal education included Latin and Greek languages. Symbolism was important to them. They modeled their capital city after ancient Athens and Rome, which is why a lot of the important buildings and monuments have a distinctly Greek and Roman style. The Latin phrase that seemed to be on the lips of everyone was *E Pluribus Unum*. We don't hear *E. Pluribus Unum* used much lately. It was last heard, I think, as a brainy line stated by the Wizard of Oz. It means, "From the many, One." The phrase has thirteen letters, representing the thirteen original colonies. The "many" refers to the thousands of immigrants who came to this country, some escaping poverty, religious persecution or tyranny and hoping for economic prosperity and freedom,. Thousands of others, of course, were captured and involuntarily imported as chattel to facilitate the prosperity of others. The "one" is that metaphorical union of those immigrants from different countries and religions, uniting them into a single nation (See "Brief Essay on the Pledge of Allegiance). The phrase *E Pluribus Unum* appears on the Great Seal of the United States and was our unofficial motto until 1956 when Congress passed a law changing it to "In God We Trust," making it official, and raising concerns for some people about the cracks appearing in the wall of separation.

We don't hear a lot about our country being a nation of immigrants anymore, except when a politician wants to burnish his *bona fides* by letting everyone know about his poor immigrant ancestors. No, we no longer pride ourselves on being part of that melting pot we were taught about in school; we seem to have abandoned the idea of showing our strength as a nation that sticks together in adversity. That idea of unity had been compared to a bundle of sticks, *fasces* (from the Latin "bundle"), because a bundle is stronger than individual sticks. "Fasces" has been replaced by its confrontational etymological descendent: *fascism*, (See essay "On Fascism"), a concept driven by ambitious political leaders seeking to have us find enemies among one another because of our differences. As journalist Molly Ivins wrote, "When politicians start talking about large groups of their fellow Americans as 'enemies,' it's time for a quiet stir of alertness. Polarizing people is a good way to win an election, and also a good way to wreck a country."

Yet each one of us, no matter what our ethnicity, religious affiliation or sex, is a unique individual, with different experiences, different skills, different opinions and different prejudices. It is this variation that is important when a new nation decides to have the people determine their own future by establishing a democracy. We can work together; we must work together; we are not "enemies" but friends.

When I moved to this town many years ago and chose to become involved in local government, I learned that boards and commissions, made up of groups of our friends and neighbors, all came to the table with those different experiences, skills, opinions and prejudices. Newsman Edward R. Murrow said, "Everyone is a prisoner of his own experiences. No one can eliminate prejudices—just recognize them." And as inefficient and messy as such committee discussions may sound, and sometimes were, the discussions allowed for a variety of opinions, and questions, and decisions that, we hoped reflected the best that could be achieved by the majority, for the purposes for which we had gathered. We worked together. That's how representative democracy works. And if our decisions were found not to please the public we represented, the people, the electorate, were periodically given by law the opportunity to terminate our right to represent them. That, too, is how representative democracy works.

This brings me at long last to the question: What are the reasons why people decide to seek—or not to seek—such power and authority? What motivates people to get involved? Why would someone seek elected or appointed office?

Here are some of the unvarnished realities confronting those who envision a vibrant democracy; you know, the one in which everyone agrees with everyone else, because, of course:

• Some people are ignorant of the duty citizenship imposes. Either through poor education or self-induced obliviousness, some simply do not realize that at the very minimum, they should register and vote.

• Some are aware of the duty of citizenship, were taught about it in school, but sensing futility or unable to reconcile the commitment with the perceived intellectual reward, opt out.

• Some are too tired out from just trying to make a living or are having health problems or family problems or are illiterate, any of which they would rather not be inadvertently revealed.

• Some feel they are ill-equipped to participate, or lack the self-confidence that public exposure sometimes requires in order to be effective.

• Some are just plain cynical.

• Some fabricate explanations for not participating.

• Some fabricate explanations *for* participating.

• Some are, understandably, repulsed by the pettiness and vindictiveness that politics can reveal in people, and which often induces or requires secret alliances. Those people therefore decline to run for elected office, or are willing only to be appointed by the municipal authority responsible.

• Some look at local politics as an opportunity for financial gain or other material interest.

• Some look to politics with the desire for power and influence, or a potential for some future reward, directly or indirectly.

• Some get involved, then do not attend, though they include their offices or membership on their expanding resume.

• Some get involved after a negative experience and decide that they can do a much better job or in their arrogance and anger in the moment join in with an ill-conceived plan to show the others how it's done, only to become disenchanted, and eventually abandon their crusade.

• Some seek involvement to indulge a proclivity for gregariousness; they seek to merge civic responsibility with social interaction, simply to develop a need for fellowship.

• Some do participate with a conscientious conviction to serve their community so as to make their town a better place to live. This is a common refrain, and only time bears out whether the allegation is legitimate. The pure do-gooder is a rare bird.

• Some, maybe most, may have more than one reason, perhaps two, three or more of the aforementioned reasons in varying amounts, and there may be other motivations not listed here that entice or repulse people from taking the step forward to civic participation.

And to this list of reasons I must add that it all occurs under the shadow of political partisanship. Regardless of the sincerity that some individuals display in their efforts on behalf of the community, perceived political allegiances by those with partisan ideologies or imagined grievances can cast suspicion on even the most devoted of do-gooders or innocents. Even efforts to remain neutral may be difficult or near impossible.

It often falls to the Republican Town Committee and the Democratic Town Committee to attract, vet, and retain candidates for public office. They look for citizens they believe can adhere to their list of respective principles and goals. But sometimes town administrations, recognizing all of the pitfalls (see above), offer an alternative. They bypass political committees by directly asking residents to participate. They post notices of openings on websites and newsletters.

However it is that an individual arrives at the decision to participate in civic activities, it behooves the municipality as well as the leaders of the political parties to supportthose who are willing to make such a commitment to their community. Without citizen participation, democratic government fails. And where does that leave us?

Richard Waterman