I Can Relate!
By Louise Phipps Senft

Voting as a Radical Relational Right

Now that the 2018 mid-terms are in the past, I have been thinking about the right to vote. It’s a radical relational right. It’s a relational right because it is both self and other motivated, intended to foster individual expression and well-being for the whole. It is an individual right of autonomy intended to be integrated in responsiveness to a larger society.

Everything about voting is relational. Consider what happens when you exercise your right to vote.

Registering to vote is both an act of personal strength and a belief that your vote matters (it does). It is an act of humility; that there is something larger than just you (there is) that you can help shape (personal strength) and that shapes you (interaction with others). Being included in society is relational. Your vote says I am included. I am a part of what happens. I have capacity. I have efficacy. The radical relational right to vote is much more than a system for winning or losing, much more than supporting a favorite candidate or slate. It’s about empowerment and responsiveness.

If you are not able to vote for one reason or the other, then talk with someone else who does have the right and encourage them to exercise it.

Voting promotes well-being and gives us the choice to be included and engaged or to bow out, to disenfranchise ourselves. It may seem paradoxical but the choice NOT to vote because it “doesn’t matter” or because “it won’t make a difference” is a highly transactional choice, maximizing self-interest (don’t feel like it, too hard, poor me, doesn’t matter, don’t like anybody) at the expense of others. Candidates will be elected on small numbers of turnout, and that damages society.

Going to your nearest polling station and getting in line is a radical relational act. You care enough about society to engage and be counted. And our country’s laws give you the privacy of your voting booth because your society believes in you and your good judgment, and you show up because you believe your vote counts. That is an exquisite relational interaction and system.

Yes, civil engagement is at the heart of every civilized society. Each voter is a strong and peaceful demonstrator. Each voter chooses to engage in differences in a relational way. Our democracy is premised on the right to vote for its very identity, existence and sustenance. Society needs us to exercise our right to vote.
The well-being of the whole benefits the more people exercise the right to vote. You want to inspire even those who have different views than yours to vote. Because even if others vote the same way you do, the more people show up to vote, the higher the likelihood for winners to emerge who reflect the greater whole. That is good for our states. That is good for collegiality and policy making.

We can use our power relationally to mobilize others to vote. You can use your communication power and your persuasion power to instill a relational motivation in all your friends, children, family members, clients, and those you meet to be engaged and vote. You can be open and non-judgmental but still have an opinion as you encourage all you talk with to vote for candidates they each believe will lead in ways that can benefit the system. Relational approaches such as these increase the likelihood that others will show up at the polls to vote, freely and thoughtfully.

If we model relational discourse in our political discussions, we remain open and curious about differences and willing to be shaped differently in our views or more expansively in our views, we create more relational outcomes. That will require each of us to be aware of not falling into the trap of our own Tribe Think. Our homes, our workplaces, our lunch counters, our society are more energized and alive when we have civic engagement. We have more thoughtful discourse when we relationally discuss politics. So whether it’s over a meal with a colleague, or the dinner table with family, or in line at the polls and casting our ballots in the booths, we can be both strong for own view and still engaged in an open society with a belief that the greater good will always emerge when each of us stays engaged and grounded in relational ways.

The potential to win is exciting, but it’s the discourse and the voting itself that is the radical relational act.

Every vote that is filtered through a relational lens for candidates who are bold and brave enough to speak relationally is a vote that also boldly and with humility says you care about issues larger than just the ones that impact you directly today. You care about issues that are part of the larger system. You care about issues that impact others and the quality of life for the next generation.

Louise Phipps Senft is a Chair of the Relational Practices Task Force and author of the best-seller, Being Relational: The Seven Ways to Quality Interaction and Lasting Change (HCI 2015). She is the founder of Baltimore Mediation (1993), is a Distinguished Fellow of the International Academy of Mediators with a practice in catastrophic injury and complex business, divorce, and trust and estate conflict. She is a nationally recognized trainer in relational theory and practice and transformative mediation.