



Anastasia Bukashe

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The Politics of Appreciation

In a globalized world, filled with seemingly insurmountable challenges, it is easy to feel powerless and overwhelmed. This article explores the power of the ordinary and every day in making a contribution to mitigating and challenging those aspects of the status quo which may be legal, but not necessarily moral, by embracing a politics of appreciation.

Growing up in apartheid South Africa, politics was about the ordinary and every day. You see, when you live in a society where every aspect of life is regulated by a law designed to separate people along racial lines, nothing is non-political. Ordinary life becomes a political statement and your lifestyle becomes a manifestation of your values and beliefs. An example to illustrate: under apartheid there were designated living areas for people of different races. In order to be in a living area that was not for your race required special permission from government. So the act of visiting a friend for a weekend led to me being arrested for the first time at the age of twelve – being without a permit was a crime.

The choices of where to shop, where to eat, who to become friends with, who to love and marry, which public spaces to use ... all became political. And those were the simple days. When you live in such a polarized society, politics loses its mystique and can be grasped in a concrete and simple way. Your contribution to the rules that govern socio-political relationships (i.e. the “body politic”) becomes tangible in the ordinary and the every day. A politics of resistance to an unjust system is easy to engage in, as the choices become clear right-and-wrong measured against a prevailing set of the values of human rights. Yet when nations embrace the institutions of democracy these choices become more complex, and right-and-wrong more difficult to distinguish. At the same time, the contribution of individuals to the body politic is mediated through the institutions we elect.

To truly appreciate politics we have to understand that it is all about the 'home we build together'

What is legal is not always moral

What does that mean? Well, the one thing that apartheid taught me is that what is legal is not always moral. And what can be proven and defended in court is not always true. An example to illustrate: democratic institutions protect the right to private property without asking the question about the deeper historical context that has created three classes of people – the “haves”, the “have nots” and the “never will haves”.

So, to truly appreciate politics we have to understand that it is all about the “home we build together”. In other words, no matter what our ideological beliefs, or our socio-political location, we are all in this together. We cannot leave our choices in the hands of vested politics; rather, citizens need to come together across these divides. Our daily choices about governance means that politics at its best is about the choices we make for the common good. As a species we stand at the brink of a fateful choice that will lead either to the annihilation of our world or a new world order, so what better time than now to embrace this notion of the common good? It has become cliché to say that we live in a globalized world. Yet, it is the reality that we need to fully embrace – that the truth of quantum physics' notion of our interconnected nature means that every choice we make is meaningful. And that we are living in outdated political institutions which have no way to give us hope and a future unless they are re-constructed to embrace this notion of our common home and therefore common destiny. But where to begin?

Appreciating politics, or the politics of appreciation?

I recently had the privilege of hosting a United Nations delegation working in South Sudan to support and protect civilians as they attempt to find a political solution. They came to South Africa to learn from South Africa's transition to democracy. This was an opportunity to connect with old friends, to reflect with outsiders on our journey from apartheid to democracy, and the humbling experience of witnessing the search for solutions to an ongoing conflict mired in the political. As we listened to one another I began to wonder if we are perhaps asking the wrong question. I wonder whether it is more helpful to think about the politics of appreciation, rather than about appreciating politics.

Let me explain. South Sudan has come out of the longest running civil war in Africa (21 years) to secede from the North. The culmination of this dream on 9 July 2011 has sadly led to yet another war, as political groups vie for power in the newly formed country. South Africa negotiated its transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994, and 23 years into our dream the country faces a serious deterioration in our political discourse and relationships. I have been left with a deep sense that if we leave our common dreams in the hands of politicians we risk losing all that we have fought for. I say this because of the nature of modern

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day politics being a win-lose affair, built on appealing to the deepest fears of an individual citizen. Making perhaps the real task a politics of appreciation.

Learning to appreciate one another, our stories, choices, beliefs – not necessarily accepting – but appreciating. Appreciating that if we have a home to build together we all need to be given space and we need to find one another. This requires each person to resist the temptation to disown or demonize the person that they disagree with. Appreciation allows us to be open to the truth that there is more that binds us together than separates us.

Daily life: An act of politics

I would offer therefore that each one of us is responsible for our contribution to the larger body politic. Each one of us makes our contribution in the ordinary and the everyday. In the same way, under apartheid, each person made daily choices which, when considered together, became an act of politics. So, each one of us has the opportunity to contribute to a politics of appreciation.

An example to illustrate: when my daughter was six she had a friend over for the weekend. That night we went to run the bath water and as usual there were a few stray ants at the bottom. As usual, my daughter started coaxing them out of the bath, gently but firmly leading them to the rim. Her friend looked at her strangely and asked what she was doing. The conversation that ensued was quite amusing to hear! My daughter explaining that the ants would burn and drown once the hot water was turned on, and her friend wondering why we should care. “How would you feel if that was the way you died and nobody cared!” was my daughters parting remark. A politics of appreciation.

Ordinary choices

The challenges facing our world are so immense as to feel overwhelming – climate change, mass displacement of people, economic disparities that have 11.5 million children going to bed hungry in South Africa alone – that it is easy to feel hopeless and helpless. Yet, history has taught the power of individual choice and how a groundswell of action can bring down a government. And even if it doesn't, at the very least each person must account for what they did and did not do in the face of these challenges.

Gandhi challenged us to be the change we want to see. A politics of appreciation takes the political out of the sphere of politicians and back into the ordinary and everyday choices of citizens. What would this mean for you?

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