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Ken Mulliken

Southern Oregon University, mullikenk@sou.edu

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A Part Of . . . or Apart From: A Reflection from South Africa

KEN MULLIKEN

Southern Oregon University

“All of humankind originated in Africa,” our tour guide, Richard Randall, announced as he greeted us in Johannesburg, “so I want to welcome you home.” This reminder of our shared ancestry, as distant as it may be, set the theme for this year’s Democracy Project field experience in South Africa.

In the summer of 2017, fourteen students from Southern Oregon University (SOU) traveled to South Africa as part of SOU’s Democracy Project. Involving students, faculty members, and community partners, the Democracy Project (DP) is a comprehensive international examination of democracy organized by the SOU Honors College. To solve shared challenges of the twenty-first century, emerging student leaders need a solid understanding of conflict resolution and of how democracy is understood, implemented, and promoted around the world. The DP is consistent with the mission and vision statements of Southern Oregon University and the honors college as it supports “intellectual growth” and “responsible global citizenship.”

Some of the issues studied through the DP include the historical evolution of democracy, sovereignty, freedom, nationalism, citizenship, immigration,

patriotism, imperialism, colonialism, liberty, security, justice, and equality. DP participants examine criteria in the *Democracy Index* and articles in the *United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. They compare and contrast the United States *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights* with national constitutions around the world, keeping in mind questions such as “what is the proper role of government?” and “in a democracy, what is the appropriate balance between individual liberties and human rights?”

Our educational experience in South Africa is the fourth field trip of the DP. Expanding from the first field trip to Washington, D.C., previous international DP field trips have studied India, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and the Czech Republic. Through conversations with journalists, professors, university students, and business leaders, these field trips have been organized so that students will better understand how democracy is structured and practiced on various jurisdictional levels.

Building on these international experiences, the DP has hosted annual symposiums at SOU that are facilitated and moderated by SOU Honors College Scholars. These symposia explore the threats and challenges to democracy in the twenty-first century and the degree to which the promotion of sustainable democracy is valuable and viable. The first symposium, “Crisis in Kashmir: Negotiating a Democratic Solution,” was hosted by the SOU Honors College in April 2016, and attended by 125 local high school students. SOU Honors College Scholars hosted the second symposium, “Seeking Refuge: The Syrian Crisis,” in April 2017, and over 350 high school students participated. The third symposium is planned for April 2018 and will focus on issues relating to African democracy.

Mark Twain is credited with two quotations that relate to the learning objectives of the DP. The first is “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.” This observation is directly applicable to democracy and conflict resolution today. At different times in history and in various locations around the world, people’s customs, language, cuisine, and clothing have contrasted sharply, but what makes history and international travel relevant to our lives today is the underlying commonality of humanity. As our South African tour guide noted, our ancestors all originated in Africa, if you trace our linguistic and genetic origins back far enough. No matter when one is born or where one is raised, we share several fundamental concerns. These concerns include love, marriage, family, employment, health, availability of food and fresh water, clothing, shelter, and freedom of personal expression. International travel reveals that we are more similar than we are different.

The second relevant quotation attributed to Mark Twain is “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes,” which is a recurring theme in our DP research. In Germany, the societal divisions evident during the period of Nazi rule in the 1930s and 1940s have been replaced by recent concerns about massive immigration from war-torn Syria. In India and Pakistan, religious disagreements that divide Hindus and Muslims date back to independence in 1947. In South Africa, over forty years of racial segregation under the system of apartheid have given way in recent decades to a period of “truth and reconciliation,” which has had mixed social results. Twain was right: history does not repeat itself, but the fundamental core of human relationships is remarkably similar regardless of time or location. Our DP research indicates that the health of a nation’s democracy and the likelihood of its long-term sustainability rest on one ultimate and essential question: do people see themselves more as “a part of, or apart from” others in society? This question seems simplistic on the surface, but the answer affects all subsequent decisions on both an individual and collective basis.

At some level, domestic politics and international relations will always be arenas of competing interests, but if we focus on goals in the *Democracy Index* and articles in the *United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, we can collectively accomplish more together than we can individually. To accomplish these goals, we each need to answer a wide range of questions both individually and collectively: What issues and problems are most urgent in our community, region, state, and nation? What bothers you and makes you frustrated or angry? What motivates you to take action? Is it homelessness, mental illness, child neglect, drugs, diseases, sex trafficking, water rights, or animal abuse? How about pollution, loss of biodiversity, global warming, income inequality, legal injustice, infant mortality, high school graduation rates, inadequate health care, high crime, lack of access to education, bigotry and prejudice, or racism? A multitude of issues cry out to be solved and require our thought, attention, and action. Ignorance of these issues or belief that one’s actions will not matter is an insufficient excuse for apathy. A successful and sustainable democracy depends on all of us to be informed and take action; it requires seeing others “as a part of rather than apart from.” Awareness, engagement, and collaborative action are the goals for the Democracy Project at Southern Oregon University.

The author may be contacted at
mullikenk@sou.edu.

