To Vote or Not to Vote
That is the Question

This editorial was “put to bed” before the Presidential election; however, regardless of whether you voted, and how you voted, hopefully you will find some useful perspectives and ideas herein.

Voting does not happen in a vacuum, nor is it a random act. Voting, as any type of action, needs thinking first. Thoughts precede actions. Unless some thinking has occurred, actions cannot happen. Hildegard Peplau, as she taught nurses how to interview patients, getting them to have new perspectives and understandings, always emphasized that efforts needed to be directed toward thought processes, not feelings.

Who were the influential people in persuading patients to think about themselves in particular ways? How did patients come to believe what was said about them? How did they decide who was credible and believable? How did they learn to sort out facts?

I remember very clearly learning about voting as I accompanied my mother to classes for naturalization. Naturalization was the term used for immigrants who wanted to become citizens. My young brain had concluded that immigrants, such as my mother, were not “natural,” but that they could become so if they passed the test to become a citizen of the United States. I remember the graduation ceremony where everyone was given little American flags, which were held high as the speaker congratulated the new citizens. They were told: “You are citizens now, and you have new responsibilities. You must vote in every election. You must know the candidates and what they stand for! You must vote responsibly.”

My mother believed that if she did not vote her citizenship would be taken away. So, I always reminded her to vote.

Who has the right to vote?

Yes, in the United States, citizens have the right to vote, but they do not always exercise this right. Of course, not all U.S. citizens always had the right to vote.

When the United States became an independent nation and our forefathers signed our first Constitution, women and slaves were not granted the right to vote. Although President Abraham Lincoln, in his 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, freed slaves, they were not given the right to vote until the passing of the 13th Amendment in 1865. That amendment, however, was understood as pertaining to men only; Black and White women still could not vote.

Women’s suffrage, the legal right for women to vote, began to gather strength in the 1840s, emerging in 1848 as a broader movement for women’s rights during the Seneca Falls Convention. This history was often mentioned by Gloria Steinem during the more modern National Organization for Women campaigns. Not until the 19th Amendment was passed in 1920 did women gain the right to vote. States’ rights, of course, have always prevailed in our country. In several states (e.g., Washington, California, Oregon, Kansas, Arizona) women were already granted the right to vote by state legis-
Professional organizations, nursing and others, are chronically dismayed by the very small voter turnout. For some elections, fewer than 25% of members eligible to vote do so. These organizations also find it difficult for members to consider becoming officers; sometimes the slate has only one name for each position.

AN OLD ADAGE
“The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41) applies to voting. Although one’s thoughts might be that voting should happen, often this action does not follow. Many barriers seem to stand in the way. An excuse for not acting used to be that voting was inconvenient. But today, polling places are open from early morning to late at night. Absentee ballots are also available. In some sectors, there are experiments in progress about voting online; however, security issues remain to be solved.

Probably the most common voiced barrier is that not actually knowing the candidates well results in indecision about how to cast one’s vote. Rather than voting regardless (perhaps tossing a coin), inaction results. Another source of indecision is knowing the candidates too well, and being unhappy with all of them; this also can result in not voting.

Another barrier is to think: “Why bother? My vote can’t possibly count.” This thinking could result in a slippery slope of helplessness. In countries where there are monarchies or oligarchies, thinking that one’s actions are meaningless might actually be reality. But that is not the case in the United States, or in other countries where votes count. Silence is not golden. People speaking up, using their voices to persuade others about needed change, is the necessary action. Movements start with voices, not silence.

BEYOND BEING A VOTER
One solution, of course, which takes a great deal of time and energy, is to decide to run for an elected office. Today, we have more nurses, both women and men, holding elected office than ever before (American Nurses Association, 2013). Who is qualified to hold office? This surely is a complex question. Unfortunately, in the current Presidential election, more rhetoric was spent on how the opposition was unqualified to lead than in persuading voters that the credentials, skills, and competence of the party’s candidates are key to placing one’s vote.

Judging competence, skills, honesty, and trustworthiness is far from an easy task. Networking, reading carefully, and relying on mentors and sages are needed. Who can be trusted? Who is believable? What evidence, such as past performance, is publicly documented?

QUESTIONS
Did you vote in the last Presidential election? If not, why not? Did you vote for any candidate in any recent election? If not, why not? Do you vote for officers or issues in your professional organizations? If not, why not?

What would it take for you to find your voice and vote?

REFERENCE

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