

POLITICS AS USUAL: Fragile Democracy

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

The events of the past week have been truly devastating.

The horrific attack in Paris has caused us to question not only the safety and sanctity of the fifth estate, but our own personal safety. It has forced us to re-examine what is important to us. We all say we value our rights, our democracy. But, I think we see those rights in the abstract. We take their presence as a given.

We don't see the reality that there are those ? a not unsubstantial number of people - who do not share our vision of the world and what it means to be a free and autonomous person.

We don't see that there are

a frightening amount of people who do not agree that a person ? any person - has the right to say and to believe what they want.

I believe we all see that now, and it is a truly terrifying sight.

I write this column each week for the paper. I do so because I am interested in politics and its impacts on my community. On occasion, I have concerns that ?some? may find what I have to say offensive and take me to task for it. But, I say it anyway because that is my right. I have a right to my opinion. I have a right to express that opinion. Regardless of what you think. Regardless of whether you are offended.

There are, of course, some extraordinarily thin-skinned folks who see slights to their persons at every turn and are thus quick to turn to the courts to silence those that seek to expose; that poke the bear. That is their right too.

But the threat of a lawsuit isn't the threat of death. Not to diminish the very real hardships suffered by those who have been sued for speaking their minds, but litigation, while frightening, expensive, life altering as it may be, is not death.

I have never been afraid for my life when giving my opinion; afraid I might get sued perhaps, but never afraid that my house will be fire-bombed.

I recognize now how lucky I am.

Think about that statement for a moment. I feel ?lucky? because I can express my opinion freely without fear of being physically attacked. Granted, I do not write about geo-political affairs. I do not write about religion. But leaving that aside for a moment, assume that I do write about religion and have a penchant for making provocative statements associated with same. In Canada, we are lucky that we can make such statements, but why should I, or anyone for that matter, feel lucky that I can?

Why should I feel the need to comment at all on whether or not I have the right to form an opinion and express it publicly?

Shouldn't that be a matter of course?

But it isn't a matter of course.

If we are honest ? and by ?we? I mean those in the media ? we all self-censor lest we offend. That is a good thing in many cases to a certain extent. It makes no sense to offend simply for the sole purpose of offending. Personally, I think some of the loud, obnoxious blowhards ? the shock jocks and ?pugnacious pontificators? - that seem to populate various media these days should just shut the heck up.

They offer nothing but bile. But, that's just my opinion. It is their choice to say what they say and it is our choice to listen.

Evelyn Beatrice Hall said, ?I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it?. Indeed prescient. That is what it means to live in a free and democratic society.

If I don't like what you have to say, I don't have to listen to you. I can argue with you. Loudly. Vigorously. Vehemently.

But I don't have the right to shoot you just because I don't like what you have to say.

Nous sommes Charlie.

Until next week, stay informed, stay involved because this is ? after all ? Our Town.