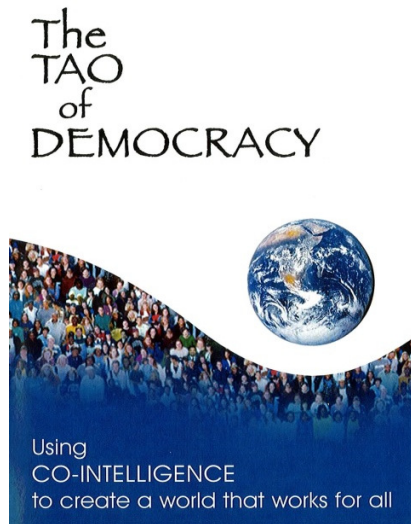


book review by john varney

Tao of Democracy

Tom Atlee

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Tom Atlee is an activist with a passion for finding a better way to engage everyone democratically: something very different from what passes for democracy anywhere today. He sets out to equip us to be more democratic, introducing the idea that if we were to think effectively together this would amount to co-intelligence: that collectively it is possible to be more intelligent than we can be when we fail to communicate deeply.

Democracy is a system that allows the knowledge and wisdom of everyone to contribute in the running of our shared affairs. In this interesting book we read of many techniques that tend towards a more effective form of democracy than is common in the early 21st century, which often results in disenchantment and in poor decision making. It is worth noting that many are used in management circles with a view to increasing engagement.

Open Space and Future Search, for instance will be familiar to many. Atlee has devoted his life to finding better ways and in this book he explores the myriad democratic or joint thinking processes that have emerged in his lifetime. He gives many details and references to such methods and suggests how they can be employed to save us from the chaos that might otherwise ensue.

This is pertinent to those who would improve our political processes and also to those whose interest is in engaging people in thinking together in organisations - especially in pursuit of self-organisation. Could the best techniques used in the organisational context be used more widely and in service of the greater good rather than to some narrower corporate end? Atlee makes a plea we often hear these days – a plea for sanity – a plea for wisdom to be valued and be allowed to play its part in bringing people into the constructive relationships of which they are capable.

It all sounds so desirable and so sensible that you would expect such ideas to be widely embraced. My own suspicion is that this is an issue because there is too much individual immaturity in our society – immature behaviour often being regarded as entertaining or as contributing to celebrity. Democracy is a fine ideal and perhaps if it were better practised it would bring about the maturity that we require? Is Atlee pointing towards some evolutionary principle we would do well to follow?