Unstuck

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The United States is founded upon the idea that we are a nation always becoming. For some, "manifest destiny" was limited to the securing of lands along vast expanses of the new frontier. For many others, and I count myself among them, it means the constant pursuit of our democratic ideals. Together, we are driven to fulfill our aspirations for a more perfect union.

In my travels to cities and towns across the country, I find that people still hold deep aspirations for making a difference in public life, but often they feel stuck, alone, or tired from trying. Many people cannot find the right path to activate these aspirations. They ask why so few people show up when given the opportunity to engage. Why is it so difficult to marshal the public will and resources to bring about sustainable change? Why, they ask, are their concerns not reflected in what they see and hear from political leaders or the news media? Why do some communities make progress on their most pressing issues, and others remain seemingly stuck in place?

Throughout the public realm we have created impulses that now place us squarely on a path of division, acrimony, and negativity – the path of opposition. Too often the goal in public life has become to oppose one idea or another, spin news and events to our advantage, generate more and more money to make our voices louder, and even destroy one's opponent. A sense of possibility and hope is squeezed out of the public realm.

THE PEOPLE'S RETREAT

In the last election, it was often said that the most pressing challenge to our democracy is the growing "Red State" vs. "Blue State" division, or the divisions between church goers vs. non-church goers, or those that exist among suburban vs. urban vs. rural voters. The assumption was that people were unable to come together.

Still, something even more fundamental than these so-called divisions ails us. Americans have retreated from politics and public life into close-knit circles of family and friends. They do not trust their leaders – nationally *and* locally. Organizations intended to work in the public interest too often pursue their own agenda – at too high a cost to society. People say they are troubled by a lack of shared purpose. The people's retreat has only deepened and calcified over the years.

I have observed this retreat over the past 17 years, crisscrossing the nation five times to listen to people's voices. As the story of apathy that was told so often in the early 1990s was peeled away, a deep citizen-anger with politics and public life was revealed. People cared about the public realm, but they felt pushed out by power brokers, lobbyists and spin-meisters. In my conversations with Americans, I have seen that anger turn to frustration, and then, over time, to a state of deep lament when people said too little progress was made on their concerns. It seemed that the people's business had taken a back seat to scandal, the politics of personal destruction, and people's own infatuation with materialism.

Throughout much of this time there was a growing belief among people that individuals must play a more active role in politics and public life. But when people could not imagine a new path for public life and a place for themselves, they began to retreat into the personal realm, where they sought to

reclaim some semblance of control over their lives. Even after a glimpse of our collective potential in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, the people's retreat continued as promises of more serious news coverage, more high-minded politics, and more citizen engagement went unfulfilled.

AN ALTERNATE PATH

Today, a notion of the public good is missing from our shared lives. In this sense, the health of democracy is not to be judged simply on the basis of voter turnout, or other large-scale indicators such as the number of people who are involved in a single initiative, or who donated to a political campaign, or visited a Web site. Rather, we must examine whether people see themselves reflected in the issues debated in politics and public life; how connected they feel to one another; whether they see themselves as citizens holding obligations to one another; and the extent to which they believe collective action is possible – even necessary. Hope itself becomes an essential measure of our democratic health.

The pragmatist John Dewey defined democracy as "a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general, but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished." My own research has shown time and again that the proper conditions for people to imagine and act for the public good are sorely lacking today. In fact, when I ask people in different communities to offer a motto for public life and politics, I often hear in response: "Me for me and you for me," and "We're willing to help when we're confident it won't jeopardize us," and "Me first!"

An alternate path would lead us to create a more vibrant and robust public life, one where the conditions exist for people to tap their own potential to make a difference and join together to build a common future. The pursuit of this path will require reevaluating how we think about and conduct our work. Indeed, it will take a rededication to the belief that, when the conditions are right, people will engage; that people want to step forward and join with others; that people want to find ways to make a difference in society; that people want to belong to something larger than themselves.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PHLANTHROPY

For philanthropy, this approach has immediate and concrete implications. It requires the need to think beyond funding single projects, and even beyond typical grant cycles. Successful projects, when approached in the right way surely can create beacons of hope, but such beacons alone will not create the kind of fundamental change that is now called for to stem the tide of retreat and move us forward.

Indeed, the propensity to support single projects can ultimately *undermine* the goal of a more vibrant public life. A two-year grant cycle may be enough time to start an initiative, produce some measurable result, declare victory and move on, but if change has had little chance to incubate, what remains?

Even worse, if initiatives foster a sense of acrimony or fan the flames of combativeness in a community or the nation, they may produce short-term gains only to turn more people away from the public square. We must not confuse our individual desire to win on a particular issue with the goal of creating more vibrant and robust conditions in politics and public life. They are not the same; we must not equate them.

The challenge is that in the current culture of opposition, our very public structures, relationships, networks, leaders and norms are not amenable or hospitable to supporting an alternate path. There are two problems here. When I go into communities or talk with foundations about their work, time and time again I find that we simply lack the right kind of catalytic mechanisms in the nation for real and sustainable change. In addition, we find ourselves operating with a very thin appreciation for how to authentically engage people, produce sustainable progress, and create genuine hope. People cannot see a way to overcome the negative conditions in public life that stymie progress.

Thus, we must create an alternate path in society, one that ignites a sense of possibility and hope. There are a number of leverage points for generating such change, but allow to me focus on just four here.

Organizations

First, we must develop a new collection of permanent, civic-minded organizations that work to transcend dividing lines in society and tap into people's innate desire to engage. This will require innovation and steadfastness on the part of those involved, as building such organizations is neither easy nor always quick. In my own work I refer to these organizations as Centers of Strength, which have nine identifiable characteristics, and which are not only effective in fulfilling their own mission but, through their own daily routines, build the structures, relationships, networks, leaders and norms that are vitally needed in public life.

These organizations would be catalysts for change, serving as advocates for ongoing engagement in public life and seeking out and encouraging people and other organizations to enter the public square. To succeed, these organizations must cultivate and guard their credibility and trust; only then will they have the power to successfully generate new norms of engagement in public life. Without these norms it is difficult for communities to function, address common challenges and improve people's quality of life. Some of these organizations will exist in individual communities; others will function on a national scale, spreading and leveraging the work through their national networks. Some will be more traditional in their operations, while others will exploit new technology platforms and approaches. The existence of these organizations is imperative to providing the long-term continuity needed to pry open room in public life to make it more vibrant and robust.

Leaders

Second, there is the need for a new kind of leader that emerges from throughout society, not just from the ranks of those who hold official titles or belong to certain civic groups or organizations. In *Hope Unraveled,* a book to be released in September that traces the nation's retreat over the past 15 years through the voices of citizens, people suggest that this leadership will not come from the traditional figures of politics, news media, corporate America or even necessarily from predictable nonprofits. Instead, people seek leaders – from any source – who understand and reflect the reality of their lives, who they believe are telling them the "whole story," and who are willing to be clear on the need for change. This leadership demands a healthy dose of courage to step forward and humility to engage others. Clarity of purpose is as important as particular skills and professional networks. This will take a different kind of leadership development – at the local *and* national levels.

New Practices and Sensibilities

Third, whoever leads the charge must embrace new public sensibilities and practices to guide their work. Too often, existing habits and actions lead people to produce the very negative conditions in public life that they are seeking to overcome. Too often, people cannot figure out effective ways around these negative conditions. Unfortunately, people then become stuck and frustrated by their lack of progress. New sensibilities and practices would focus on such fundamental questions as:

- What does it mean for us to hold and exercise authority in a society where we can no longer simply claim it – and what are the implications for us to truly understand people and their concerns, where they live, and their aspirations; and how should we infuse this knowledge into our daily and strategic decision making?
- What does it mean to be authentic in a society increasingly focused on manufacturing false authenticity? How should we think about the impact of our words and deeds?
- What does it mean to hold oneself accountable for one's own words and deeds, for the very change processes one undertakes, especially when our reflexes so often prompt us to point fingers, assess blame, and avoid responsibility?

Our words and deeds count – especially in the current environment where so little credibility and trust exists and where people must prove their worthiness before they are to be believed and supported.

Hope

Fourth, we must consider what gives people hope. Today there is a hidden competition of narratives in politics and public life. The dominant narrative, the one that overwhelms the public realm today, is driven by notions of division, acrimony and negativity. This narrative literally shapes how people view, talk about, and relate to politics and public life. Go into any community or even any organization and you can hear this narrative at work.

But there is the potential, through our collective efforts, to nurture an alternate narrative, one that taps into the innate American belief in possibility and hope. To create such change, we must exercise caution. For this alternate narrative must be rooted in real action, not in public relations campaigns. And yet the latter is what often occurs.

But such an approach will only deepen the cynicism and mistrust of a nation already in retreat. Stories that are authentic, however, will act as a vital force in combating the narrative of division, acrimony, and negativity that has become so overwhelming. Our goal must be to slowly seed society with stories that illuminate how people have been able to pursue an alternate path in the public realm.

The philanthropic sector has a rare opportunity that few others in society enjoy: the ability to ignite a sense of possibility and hope in politics and public life through its work. We all know that this task will not be easy or without risk. Indeed, pursuing an alternate path will require some, if not many, foundations to examine their own internal approaches to promoting a healthy democracy. For instance, here are just a handful of factors that would need to be considered:

- Notions of time – foundations will need to experiment with determining acceptable amounts of time necessary to develop the right kinds of civic-minded organizations, leaders, networks and norms.
- Parallel investments – foundations will need to imagine, and then work with their staffs, to identify how to make investments that promote progress on specific issues they care about *and* that create the conditions for a more vibrant, robust public life and politics. Both can happen simultaneously.
- Measure progress – foundations will need to hold their grantees and themselves accountable for investments in changing the conditions of public life and politics. This is will likely require developing new benchmarks that accurately reflect the true nature of this work.
- Diffusion – foundations will need to resist the temptation merely to "scale up" these efforts. Changes in sensibilities and practices come about when people embrace them. This calls for a strategy of diffusion, not scaling up.
- People's potential – foundations will need to test their own beliefs about the potential of people in communities, organizations and leadership positions to step forward, join together, and create change.

There is no "big bang theory" of change that informs the ideas I have outlined here. Instead, the process involved is probably best reflected in the timeless words of Dorothy Day:

> *People say, what is the sense of our small effort?*
> *They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.*
> *A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that.*
> *No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless.*
> *There's too much work to do.*

Indeed, there is much unfinished work to do in our nation. And yet too many people have retreated. Now, our common task is to get unstuck.

SELECTED REFERENCES

John Dewey and the Promise of America, Progressive Education Booklet No. 14 (Columbus, Ohio: American Education Press, 1939), pp. 15

The following Harwood Institute publications further explore the issues discussed in this paper:

- *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street,* 1991
- *Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships With Public Concerns*, 1993
- *Public Capital: The Dynamic System that Makes Public Life Work,* 1996
- *Community Rhythms: Five Stages of Community Life,* 1999
- *A New Political Covenant: America's Aspirations for Political Conduct,* 2002
- *Making It Real: How to Make Civic Engagement a Public Sensibility,* 2003
- *A Call for Leaders,* 2004
- *The Engagement Path: The Realities of How People Engage Over Time – and the Possibility for Re-Engaging Americans,* 2005
- *Hope Unraveled,* Forthcoming - Fall 2005

BIOGRAPHY & CONTACT INFORMATION

Richard C. Harwood *is founder and President of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. He founded the institute in 1998, following 10 years as president of the for-profit Harwood Group. For 17 years, his work has been focused on improving America's communities, raising standards of political conduct and re-engaging citizens on today's most complex and controversial public issues. He has worked with thousands of people in dozens of U.S. cities, spreading his vision for what American society should be and putting innovative practices to use on the ground to turn that vision into reality. His past experience includes service on the policy staffs of U.S. presidential and congressional election campaigns and as director of issues research for Public Agenda. Rich has traveled in the former Soviet Union to consult with mayors and non-governmental organizations on more effective governance. He is a frequent keynote speaker for foundations and national organizations; a commentator and contributor on national and syndicated television, newspapers, radio and web sites; and a regular panelist on "A Public Voice," hosted by former CNN news anchor Frank Sesno. He received his B.A. in Political Economy from Skidmore College, graduated Phi Beta Kappa and was a Harry S Truman Scholar. He received his M.A. in Public Affairs from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.*

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PACE INVITES YOUR COMMENTS

This essay is one of a set of eight essays that ***PACE*** commissioned in 2005 for our first national gathering, titled ***The Condition of Democracy in America and What Philanthropy Can Do About It***. ***PACE*** - Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (www.pacefunders.org) is an emerging community of donors and grantmakers committed to strengthening democracy by supporting pathways for individual participation in civic and community life. We hope this and the other essays in the series will stimulate productive conversations across different groups and different philosophies about how to unleash the power of individual participation in solving the problems of our communities and nation.

I welcome your comments and questions about this essay.

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