

Letting Foundation

CONNECTIONS

Winter 2006



CONNECTIONS

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Engaging Citizens

Challenge One

Some research suggests that many of today's citizens are not engaged in the collective work of community problem solving.

DISCONNECTING and Reconnecting with Community

By **Richard C. Harwood**

*This article is excerpted and adapted from *Hope Unraveled: The People's Retreat and Our Way Back* written by Richard C. Harwood and published by Kettering Foundation Press (2005).*

Listen carefully and you can hear the dominant narrative of our times: We are a nation divided between red states and blue states, church-goers and non-church-goers, as well as urban and suburban and rural voters.

But in conversations I have held with Americans over the past 15 years about

their relationship to politics, public life, and to each other, it is clear that this conventional wisdom is wrong—and dangerously misleading. Rather, our dilemma is that people have retreated altogether from politics and public life into close-knit circles of family and friends. They have thrown up their hands in dismay; they have walked away and turned inward.

There are many reasons for people's retreat. Here are two key drivers: The first is that when people look out into public life and politics, they do not see their reality reflected. This leaves people with the feeling that they are on their own, without the confidence that their concerns will be understood or addressed.

The second reason is even more troubling and potentially harmful: the actual distortion of people's reality. Today, people believe that their concerns and hopes are being mercilessly abused and mangled in the daily iterations of public life and politics. The source of such manipulation is political leaders who are more focused on their own personal interests than the common interest; news media that are more concerned with hyping and sensationalizing the news than in illuminating the tough issues we collectively must face; and even community, civic, and neighborhood leaders who are obsessed with protecting their own turf and shrinking budgets and jockeying to claim credit for good deeds.

People are unable to see and hear and feel themselves in the public square, and much of what they do experience seems unreal. In this way, we must know that people are robbed of the vital sense of coherence that we, as human beings, so urgently seek—especially in times of significant change. A sense of possibility

Challenge One

and hope is now missing from our public affairs.

But there is more. At every turn it seems that we Americans—that is, each of us as individuals—have taken on the title of the “almighty consumer”—expecting to get what we want, when we want it, at the highest quality and the lowest cost. It can seem at times that we hold limitless expectations, and that we’re on constant high alert, ready to complain the moment we perceive that our desires are not being fulfilled.

And yet, how is it that we will cultivate the collective understanding and will necessary to address a host of public concerns if so many of us have retreated and think of ourselves as isolated consumers freelancing through society?

When I have asked people in different communities to give me a motto for the nation, one person responded by saying, “I’ve got mine and to heck with you.” Another individual said, “I’m for me and you’re for you.” And a third person gave me this motto: “I’m for me and you’re for me!”

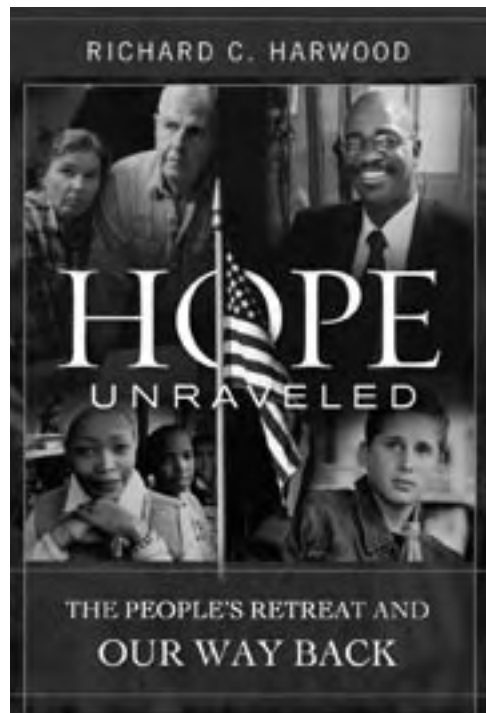
Unfortunately, those of us working on issues of public concern often reinforce people’s vision of themselves as footloose consumers. We employ customer-service models in our work, consistently asking people, “What can we do for *you*?” Too often we fail to ask people to consider the whole of the community; and too often public discourse focuses on people’s demands and complaints and claims rather than on identifying common aspirations and tapping into people’s sense of obligation to one another.

What’s more, too many of us pursue advocacy approaches—on issues such as school vouchers, health care, social security, and others—that employ the same divisive tactics people see coming from their political leaders, all the while masquerading as “civic engagement.” I can’t begin to recount how many times people have described to me their efforts to “engage” Americans on public issues that add up to nothing more than selling people on a position, subtly striking fear in people’s hearts, and figuring out how to beat back their opponents.

Such tactics merely amplify and deepen the negative conditions of politics and public life. These efforts are at the

root of what drives people from the public square.

I believe that, if we are to tap the power of individuals in our society and bring people back to the public square, we must begin to engage people in ways that actively ask them to think about and weigh their interests in relationship to those around them; to see larger societal needs at work; to imagine the possibilities for what can be achieved when we come together to act in the public realm.



If you believe, as I do, that we must find better ways to foster the collective will and action among people to create change in our communities, then we must pursue an alternate path for politics and public life. There are three building blocks that I believe must be at the heart of any and all efforts to create such change.

- First, we must square up with the reality of people’s lives. By this I mean we must understand why people have retreated and under what conditions they will step forward.
- Second, we must tap into people’s desire to be part of something larger than themselves and to work for the public good not just their own good. Our task is to forgo engaging people as isolated consumers and reestablish a sense of purpose and meaning in our public affairs. Otherwise, we will be unable to

bring people together to address our common concerns.

- Third, we must affirm our commitment to hope. But meeting this challenge requires that we make a clear distinction between false hope and authentic hope. People do not want to endure more disappointment.

People often say to me that the challenge of reversing people’s retreat can feel overwhelming. My own response to them is the following: If each of us believes that we alone can reverse this retreat, then we will be overwhelmed. But if each of us takes our part of the challenge—that part which is near to us and over which we have some control—then change is possible.

My own experience tells me that, if we remain on our current course, too many of us will remain on the sidelines, spectators of the public square, just at a time when we are needed most. Too many of us will buy into the assumption that we are powerless, when action is possible. Too many well-meaning efforts will fail to adequately address the great challenge of people’s disaffection that now confronts us. Worse yet, too many endeavors will be designed and implemented to further divide politics and public life and diminish people’s hope.

I vividly recall a woman in Richmond telling me 15 years ago that, “If we say we’re frustrated and not going to do anything about it, then we won’t. But if we keep trying, we might make a difference.” The people’s voices tell us that we must see ourselves differently if we are to find hope in an era of retreat. They tell us that, to find an alternate path, we must act with authentic hope, and they urge us to step forward.

Richard C. Harwood is president and founder of the nonprofit, nonpartisan Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. He can be reached by e-mail at rharwood@theharwoodinstitute.org.

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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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Editors

David S. Frech
John Dedrick

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Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.

Copy Editor

Lisa Boone-Berry

Illustrations

Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.

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200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799 (937) 434-7300

444 North Capitol Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478

6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016 (212) 686-7016

Kettering Foundation
200 Commons Road
Dayton, OH 45459-2799

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