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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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KETTERING  
**REVIEW**

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December 2012

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# Where We Are Today

by Richard Harwood

*“The public  
hadn’t rejected  
politics . . . they  
felt that politics  
had rejected them.”*

**A** look at our first Main Street study, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, published in 1991, may be a good way to consider the very different findings of our new Main Street study, just 20 years later. In 1991, the nation’s political system and its many failings dominated our conversations with Americans across the country. Today, the conversations are radically changed. The currency of our time is no longer politics, but people, their lives, and their everyday concerns. It is, ultimately, about what it means to move forward *together*, to restore a sense of faith in ourselves and in one another.

Our original Main Street report was among the first in the nation to reveal that Americans were not apathetic about politics and public life—as conventional wisdom had insisted—but instead felt pushed out, disconnected, and impotent. The public hadn’t rejected politics; in effect, they felt that politics had rejected them. Americans complained bitterly, with anger, about a system made up of politicians, news media, and special interests that had overtaken what I refer to as the public square and operated with little regard for the people who lived and worked within it.

Ironically, this sense of disconnection, and the unmitigated anger that accompanied it, was bubbling up in the nation just as the United States was finding victory in the first Gulf War, a wave of patriotism was sweeping the country, and President George H. W. Bush was enjoying sky-high approval ratings. Still, amid the celebrations and hoopla, our discussions with people indicated that something was terribly wrong in the body politic: people’s deep anger had not abated, nor would it.

America must “think anew about politics if we are to improve our political health,” I wrote in the first Main Street study. The recommendations we put forward based on those discussions focused on the urgent need to find more and better ways to shift the political debate towards issues people cared about. We argued for the need for citizens to form a public voice on policy issues to counteract the voices of powerful special interests. And we believed there was the need to create more effective ways for citizens and public officials to interact more constructively. What we proposed sought to change the workings of politics and find a place for citizens within it.

All this is part of the past.

What we learned in this new study is that “politics” and people’s disgust about it is no longer the central, dominant narrative in America. Now the endless, often mind-numbing churn of politics lives outside people’s everyday world—operating as if in an entirely separate universe, with its own set of rules, winners and losers, and purpose. The fact is, people barely mentioned it, relatively speaking. Their chief concerns are elsewhere.



In recent years, the country has endured the largest economic downturn since the Great Depression, two wars, and enough acrimony and divisiveness to virtually grind our public discourse and collective efforts to a halt. Along the way, Barack Obama was elected president, and many people thought—*wished*—his election

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## People have been bereft of a sense of possibility.

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would signify a positive transformational turn in our politics and public life. Since then, *outrage* has boiled over in the form of the right-leaning “Tea Party” and the left-leaning “Occupy Wall Street,” among other protests, movements, and initiatives that seek to organize Americans into battalions of anger.

In our new discussions with Americans across the country we learned that people have been left bereft of a sense of possibility. We learned that people condemn our individual and collective inability to come together to get things done. They are exhausted by the public recriminations and acrimony that hold our discourse hostage. There is palpable fear among them over their ever-increasing sense of isolation from one another. At the heart of these feelings is the deep sense—the belief—that current conditions in America actively undermine much of what is good and right in our society—and in our very selves.

People believe we can do better. There is a yearning within them to come back into the public square to engage with *one another*, to find ways to get things done *together*, and to restore their belief in themselves and their fellow citizens. Put another way, what people are telling us about is a desire to reclaim a sense of humanity

and to tap the innate goodness and potential that resides within each of us. As they see it, only then can the negative conditions now shaping the nation be fought and, ultimately, altered.

The good news is that people are ready to step forward, if the conditions are right.

If 1991 was about the political system, then 2012 is about something more distinctly human. The Americans with whom we've been speaking long to pierce through the noise enveloping their lives and society-at-large, to get back to basics regarding what is most important and vital in life. They long to put America on a different trajectory, a new path. Based on these conversations, I believe there are three guideposts for moving forward, which I briefly describe here:

- Our sense of humanity. Present-day conditions too often leave little room for people's aspirations and the values they care about. Instead, people and their lives are sidelined, squeezed out, even stripped out of how American life operates. Now people insist we must focus on making room for genuine human interactions and for people to express and make real their basic human yearnings and hopes.
- Getting things done together. We live in a time when progress can seem impossible and "gridlock" is our default posture. Now Americans want to find ways to come together, set goals, achieve them, and build from there.
- Restoration of belief in ourselves and in one another. Much of what happens in the public square today is that we push ourselves apart from one another, place blame for our failings, and cast aspersions. "Belief" is the new currency of change—the belief that we can act together, and that we have the ability, know-how, and

wisdom to do so. But there is no silver bullet to achieve this.

Listening closely to Americans, we find that they do not express a desire for political leaders to fix problems for them. Nor do they expect some big foundation, organization, or other group single-handedly to lead the way to hopefulness and a more humane life (as if they, alone, knew

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## Believe that we hold shared interests.

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the way). They do not complain endlessly about the shortcomings of others, as they did in 1991. More often people see themselves as the critical actors in righting the nation and their lives today.

They are clear that to move in a new direction—down a new path—will require getting back to enduring values people have long cherished and which now must guide the country in moving forward. The values they point to include: compassion—the need for people once again to see and hear each other, reach out to the other, and support each another; the importance of children—viewed as a gauge of the very health of our society, and the basis upon which to build the future; openness and humility—the



room to engage with others, listen attentively, discern what may be truly important, and thus act with care; and concern for the common good—to believe, at a time when people are implored daily to think solely about their own survival, their own good, that we hold shared interests.

As I have found over and over in my work across the country, the most vital solution to a problem is sometimes one that resides closest to us, within us. At times, the most enduring and reliable solutions are like that—if only we can open our eyes to see them.

Yet as promising and as essential as these enduring values are, people also want to identify practical ways to get things moving—to put the values into motion and create a different dynamic in their own lives, in their communities, and in the nation as a whole. Through these discussions it becomes apparent that people seek to kick-start a new trajectory—a new direction for the country, a new sense of hope and possibility. They do not believe this will happen overnight; nor will it come from a series of large, grand, new initiatives or policies, for many people no doubt would question the veracity and reliability of such efforts. This new trajectory, people say,

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## People can rediscover their own innate power.

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will take shape only through actions that start small, and locally, between and among them, beginning close to home, on a human scale. In this way, people coming out from their homes can start to rebuild trust. They can both set goals and achieve them. They can restore belief in themselves and in one another.

Still, those Americans we spoke with are clear that even these actions, whatever form they may take, would not alone be enough to solve our most pressing challenges. Rather, the true



power of such actions is in signaling to ourselves and to others what is possible. It is to make an entreaty, as it were, to fellow Americans to come back into the public square. What people want is to engender an ever-growing ripple effect in the nation that in turn will lead to forging new and more productive norms in the public square.

The reasons for this close-to-home, small-scale approach are clear. The nation is stuck, stymied. Too few openings seem available for positive movement. Various leaders and organizations appear to lack a desire and willingness to get things done together. And people remain anxious and uncertain about their future while mistrust abounds. What people seem to be saying is that this new trajectory can serve as a counterforce to business-as-usual, where actions come from outside the current system. People believe this is how we must start to change the country's direction. They believe that these actions, taken together, can produce a disruption, a jolt to the system itself. And it is through these ever-expanding, locally grown actions that people can tap into and rediscover their own innate power and potential to shape their environment and find greater control over their lives and their future.

Let's be clear: this is not to say that changes from within the system are not needed or valued; only that people are not holding their breath for such changes to come about and for any such changes to be effective. What this adds up to is a radical departure from what people said in 1991: the focus is now on people creating action from outside the political system rather than working entirely from the inside.

The good news in this regard is that all across the country, in communities large and small, many promising pockets of change already have taken root and are flourishing, while many others are starting each and every day. While this is not the place to catalogue these many pockets of change, it is possible to say what they often hold in common. They provide room for people to act on their aspirations (as opposed to primarily their complaints and claims) for their community. They enable people to come together and make choices about how they can take action, together. They help to align organizations and institutions— together with everyday people—in ways that bring about effective collective action. Such efforts take place on a host of issues and concerns, and can actively be built upon in creating a new trajectory.

**B**efore we go any further in pursuing what the new Main Street study tells us about America, an important warning is in order. We need to be on guard against conventional wisdom, which today, as always, offers its own ways about how to move the country forward. A few moments of reflection show that these conventional ways often bear little relationship to people reclaiming a sense of humanity, restoring their belief in themselves and others, and getting things done together. In fact, just the opposite can be true: the worn path of conventional wisdom can exacerbate—deepen—the very maladies we seek to overcome. Conventional wisdom, left unexamined and

unchecked, tends to keep us on the same old path that people like those we talked with in this new study so desperately want to escape.

Consider these examples of what conventional wisdom urges us to do—all of which we must avoid:

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## Conventional wisdom, unexamined and unchecked, tends to keep us on the same old path.

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- Turn up the volume of acrimony and divisiveness as a method to mobilize supporters and drown out—or overwhelm—opponents in order to “win for our side”;
- Launch yet another new program, initiative, or policy, only this time make it bigger, with more public relations punch, and one based on promises to change the world;
- Organize people to express their outrage and make demands—to push, push, and push! (And what happens after the outrage?)
- Raise more money in order to do more—but toward what end?
- Tap the power of the Internet to get people to donate money and engage in support for a cause—as if these actions alone will meet people's true desire to reengage and reconnect;
- Pursue the magic bullet of some legislative fix, or pursue the perfect candidate, as if such pursuits on their own will be enough;
- Create mechanized approaches to be more efficient in engaging people and more productive in scaling efforts—but without reference to people's sense of humanity?

Any of these steps may very well enable some individuals, political parties, and other interested groups to win an election, a policy debate, or appeal to more new members or supporters for their cause. They may result in greater attention for one point-of-view or another. They may spur more people to donate money. Even those groups that expressly make their mission the well-being of communities and society-writ-large—which include various nonprofits, foundations, and neighborhood groups, among others—increasingly adopt these approaches. Sometimes they are wrapped in more palatable language, strategies, and taglines, but nonetheless they are guided by the same underlying assumptions that will change nothing fundamental and keep alive the blockades that prevent us from finding the new ways of joining together. Such steps will not address people’s deepest yearnings.

Nor will these conventional responses address a set of deep challenges that have been taking shape for years, and are not only harmful now, but part of a more complicated story than outlined thus far. These deeper challenges must be fully understood and addressed in order to move forward. Among them is the triumph of consumerism in the United States, the likes of which make us an impulsive society, where instant gratification is the expectation and thinking about being part of something larger than ourselves seems beyond our reach. There is a pervasive absence of trust in leaders and organizations of all kinds, at all levels, in society, including at times those individuals closest to us in our own lives. There are, people say, a set of rigged rules that favor the wealthy and powerful and “connected,” which have led many to believe the American Dream is no longer possible, and leaves them with little recourse. People worry that a broken moral compass continually leads them and the country down the wrong path—when we already know the right thing to do.



These challenges have come to circumscribe people’s lives—shaping what they do in everyday life, what they have come to believe in, and what it means to move forward from here. Maybe for years these challenges have nagged and pulled at us, trying to grab our full attention; now they’re center stage. They strike directly at how we see ourselves and who we will be. People say they must be addressed if they are to put themselves and the nation on a better course, yet we must recognize [know] that these deeper challenges make the course ahead more difficult, more divisive.

**W**hat we hear in the words of people interviewed and talking together this past year—hear in their dismay and in their longings for another way—indicates that to move forward will require that we come to grips with the challenges that face us. We must be willing to see them and to engage with them; we must turn toward them, not turn away from them. I believe that Americans are ready to do this; they see no other option.

And what I report also tells us we must turn our attention to the underlying conditions that can place us on a better path. It is these conditions that are the very ingredients that

make society and people's lives work. Thus, at this juncture in the nation's journey, we must not let slip from our minds—from our very line of sight—what it means to make room for people to exercise their deepest yearnings, to make them real, to bring them to life. The greatest risk at hand is that we fail to reclaim and build the necessary space for genuine human interac-

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## Build the space for interactions to occur, for people to come together.

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tions to occur, for people to come together, for the seeds of belief to be nurtured and grown.

People talk about their lives and this nation. As I have listened closely to their voices, and placed them in the broader context of my more than a quarter-century of work, I am struck by what they suggest. Surely, there are any number of ways to move forward from here, but I ask us all to focus on the following five elements. They are not offered, singly or together, as any kind of a silver bullet; nor are they intended to be comprehensive. Rather, they provide a starting point, a way for us to place people, their lives, and the life of the nation on a different path forward.

First, we must make the necessary room for people to come back into the public square in ways that will enable them actually to interact, build trust. We must avoid succumbing to fast and easy ways of engagement that merely ask people to donate from the comforts of their home, or plug-in for quickie volunteering experiences in which they have little real interaction with others, and the like. Such efforts can produce laudable benefits in the short run, but they do not answer people's deep yearnings to come together.

Second, we must produce opportunities for people to act on a human scale. Small and local is where people want to start—where they can regain their footing, their confidence, and do things together. People want to see and drive such actions, and enlarge them, moving forward. We must beware of simply engaging people in someone else's journey—in some other group's goals—where no room exists for genuine actions driven by individual citizens.

Third, we must be ever-vigilant in how we approach this path forward. It is all too easy to adopt the right words—*compassion*, *openness*, *humility*, and the *common good*—yet not experience their true meaning. We must create in various initiatives and efforts—in our own daily lives—room for these enduring values to be exercised and to flourish. The question to ask is, how can we make genuine room for these values in our daily lives and work? The impulse always is to say they are present in our work—to give ourselves a good grade—when they are present in name only.

Fourth, to repeat themes from previous elements, we must make the necessary room for people to come back into the public square so that they are actually working together, on a human scale, where real room exists to exercise



compassion, openness, humility and find the common good. All these must be tended to if collective action is to succeed. Without this underlying foundation, we cannot create necessary public will, the public discourse that can produce it, and the marshalling of individual and collective resources that are required to move a democratic people ahead effectively. Set apart

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## Place people, their lives, and the life of the nation on a different path forward.

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from this essential foundation, collective action runs the risk of becoming merely an exercise in moving existing ways of doing things in communities around, without paying attention to what



matters most to people. A recipe merely to continue down the worn path we seek to change.

Fifth, and finally, we must know that change won't come all at once. It never has! So as people and groups build ever-expanding efforts at change, we must pay special attention to creating a new narrative about being on a better course, one that offers people genuine hope and possibility. This happens only when people can see how a larger story is unfolding over time—how one example of action, or one “proof point,” connects to many others, and then to yet another! Such proof points are less about an organization's triumph—its record-setting fundraising or its own narrow metrics—and more about people, their lives, and their concerns.

What we have come to know in this new Main Street study is that our main task today is to make room within people's lives and the larger society for a greater sense of humanity to take hold and guide us; to act on a more human scale, where people can start close to home, and exercise greater control. It is to find new and better ways to insert into our lives a greater degree of compassion, openness, humility, and concern for the common good. It is to restore people's belief in themselves. And one another.

A new path!

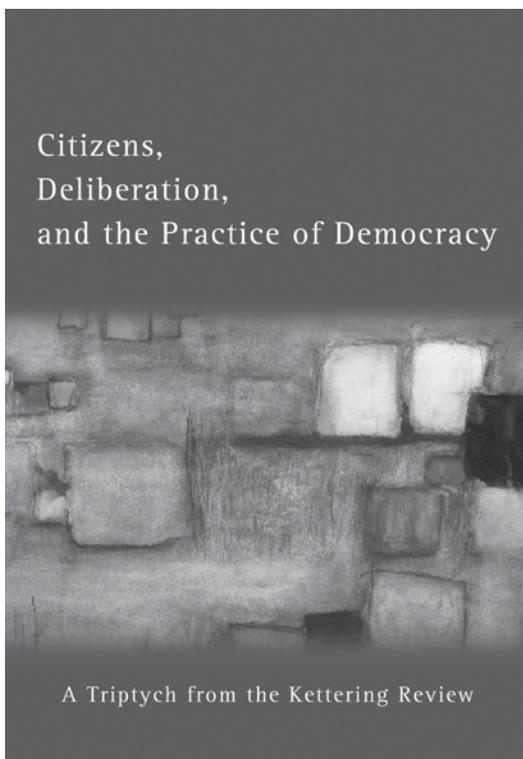
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*Richard Harwood is founder and president of the Harwood Institute. This essay is drawn from The Work of Hope, published earlier this year by the Kettering Foundation Press.*



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