A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving the quality of public life in the American democracy
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Editor’s Letter

For more than 30 years, now—and 2 or 3 times in most of those years—the Review has circulated a handful of essays (some old and some never before printed) describing ways in which “we, the people” are exploring, or need to explore, the problems of our democratic community. The Kettering Foundation has, incidentally, just reprinted a collection of three issues of the Review, published in 2005 to acknowledge a quarter-century of the annual National Issues Forums; and our most recent couple of issues turn out to have addressed aspects of the role of education (and the institutions that address it) in the life of our democracy today.

There are difficulties, however, in asking people what they want from something that is as personal (and possibly distinctive) as their child’s education—or their own career. With higher education, we may have a number of goals, or purposes, each one of which seems intent upon either the exclusion of alternative goals, or the provision of differently rationed “pieces” of them for differently inclined citizens. The purpose of any education includes the task of making useable or useful (if there turns out to be a difference!) a range of talents that will inevitably differ in their usefulness to the community as a whole. So the value of a particular kind or level of education is essentially relative.

Much of human activity is both variable and valuable in this way, responding to the differences among individual human abilities, values, and lives. We acknowledge public responsibility for education in relation to this variety by catering to different kinds of skill and talent and need. Or to put it more bluntly, we have come to acknowledge and respond to it slowly, over centuries of distinctive cultural experience. Rulers needed a different education from that which peasants needed through endless dynasties. Democracy has not changed that, except to the degree that rulers nowadays are not always produced through dynasties, although failed communities apparently still do produce primarily failed citizens.

A concern, then, is how education in a democracy caters to difference, if it sets out to be both universal and egalitarian. That may be the direction in which human education has always wandered. Or it may no longer be so for us! We have gone from private tutors to public schools; from teachings of the Church to learning from the professionals; through the seemingly miraculous legacies of private schools to land-grant universities and community colleges; and now private, “for profit” universities that exist online. These all seem to have been, up to a point, thoughtful steps to cope with the dilemma that we are describing. And that seems to be a human dilemma, as inherent to our experience as the facts of competition and greed, mystery and hope. There are ways of fulfilling ourselves while still limited in talent and years and committed to both the ideals of national culture and the
facts of an everlasting human world—which, in themselves, may sometimes appear to be designedly incompatible.

But these are troubling times for our democracy, and for the institutions whose work it depends upon. So we thought, this season, that we might bring together in one slender volume just a handful of contemporary essays or chapters, exploring the nature of some of our present uncertainties, as a people, and of the challenges that the writers think need to be addressed as a new generation grows to take its place before the problems of our democracies. After reading these essays and extracts, some readers may be tempted to think that we are nearing “the fall”! For each essay—and all were first published within this past year or two—sees democratic peoples losing their sense of direction. Nor is this to be taken as mere election-year hyperbole, for ideologically these writers seem to stand each on somewhat different ground and write with somewhat different havens in their minds and memories.

The distinguished historian, Charles Murray, for example, starts us off with what was written as the prologue, earlier this year, to his book, *Coming Apart*. It cites the assassination of President Kennedy as the beginning of an era of persistent change in this nation’s life—virtually half a century of dramatic upheaval that is undeniable, if not to all of our readers as devastating in its consequences as the author infers.

This sense of regret (though not from a similar ideological perspective) is echoed by Bruce Wilshire, who fears that the emphasis in today’s institutions of higher education—“mathematical, mechanistic physics . . . and technologies of all kinds”—leaves graduates to “wonder if they can know themselves and if they can direct themselves intelligently.” A similar concern is articulated, later in this issue of our magazine, by Martha Nussbaum, who sees “a worldwide crisis in education developing because of the ways in which democratic societies, “thirsty for national profit,” are “heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive.”

Nussbaum is, of course, calling for a return to the “humanities” (as traditional studies in philosophy, history, literature, and the arts are collectively billed), and *this Review* is also honored to reprint a recent lecture by James Leach who, after many years in Congress as a distinguished representative from Iowa, now serves as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the federal agency through which we, the people, support precisely such studies—and the scholars and students, as well as public groups, who work to advance our understanding of differences. “To lead the world in this century,” he writes, “it is the human condition, the culture and history of countries” that have to be better understood.
From the continuing studies that Public Agenda has made of higher education, through the eyes of a wide range of citizens in recent years, Jean Johnson concludes that lines are being drawn for an “epic battle” over higher education. And each one of the earlier essays in this issue of the *Review*—all made, let us note, just months, rather than years, ago—seem to lend support to her concern. So we have given our closing pages in this issue to the first chapter of Richard Harwood’s newly published book, *The Work of Hope*. Harwood recalls his *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street, America*, published in 1991, reporting that Americans were not apathetic about politics but “felt pushed out, disconnected.” And echoes of that “disconnect”—deadly to the fate of a democracy—are revealed in each one of our essays’ pages of this *Review*. Harwood himself begins his 2012 essay with a people “bereft of a sense of possibility” but “yearning to engage with one another to get things done together.” Harwood’s “new path,” as he dubs it, “is to restore people’s belief in themselves.”

New York’s Museum of Modern Art—for whose permission to reprint the striking painting by Giacomo Balla on our cover, we are most grateful—reminds us that the Futurists of the early 20th century insisted that “all things move . . . all things are rapidly changing.” So, as David Mathews in his “afterthoughts . . .” points out, are our schools, our students, and their families. The past couple of issues of this *Review* have been exploring the challenge that such changing circumstances present to educators and the communities that they serve. Our writers for this season—all very contemporary—begin to explore citizens’ responsibility in a democratic world whose motion, whose history itself, is a record of the option of change.

Robert J. Kingston
“Nor could he, nor any of his audience have had any way of knowing how much America was about to change, in everything . . .”

In retrospect, a single day often comes to demarcate the transition between eras. Never mind that the Continental Congress voted to declare the colonies’ independence on July second and that the document probably wasn’t signed until August. The Fourth of July, the day the text of the Declaration of Independence was adopted, will forever be the symbolic first day of the new nation. In the 20th century, December 7, 1941, became the symbolic end of an America that held the world at arm’s length and the beginning of America the superpower. November 22, 1963, became the symbolic first day of what would be known as the Sixties, and of the cultural transformation that wound its course through the subsequent decades. The symbolic last day of the culture that preceded it was November 21, 1963.

It was a Thursday. New York City saw a trace of rain that day, with a high of 56, ending several days’ run of late-autumn sunshine. As dusk fell at CBS headquarters at 485 Madison Avenue, Walter Cronkite was in the anchor chair for the *CBS Evening News*. Just a year and a half into his job, Cronkite was not yet the nation’s Uncle Walter. He wasn’t even the nation’s leading anchorman. His ratings had lagged behind those of Huntley and Brinkley on NBC from the beginning, and the shift in September from a 15-minute program to a half-hour program had done nothing to close the gap.

There wasn’t much news to spice up the broadcast this evening. The day had produced one good human-interest story: Robert Stroud, the Birdman of Alcatraz, had died in his sleep at the federal prison in Springfield, Missouri, that morning. But otherwise, the news was humdrum. The Senate Armed Services Committee
The explanation for the ratings of 1963 is simple: There wasn’t much choice. Most major cities had only four channels (CBS, NBC, ABC, and a nonprofit station of some sort) at most. People in some markets had access to just one channel—the monopoly in Austin, Texas, where the lone station was owned by Lady Bird Johnson, was the most notorious example.

The limited choices in television viewing were just one example of something that would come as a surprise to a child of the 21st century transported back to 1963: the lack of all sorts of variety, and a simplicity that now seems almost quaint.

Popular music consisted of a single Top 40 list, with rock, country, folk, and a fair number of Fifties-style ballads lumped together. No separate stations specializing in different genres, except for country music stations in a few parts of the nation. Except in university towns and the very largest cities, bookstores were small and scarce, usually carrying only a few hundred titles. No Amazon! If you didn’t see a movie during the week or two it was showing in your town, you would probably never see it. No DVDs. With television, you either saw a show the night it played or waited until it was repeated once during the summer. No TiVo.
People drove cars made in the United States. Foreign cars from Europe were expensive and rare. Cars from Japan had just been introduced in 1963, but had not been greeted with enthusiasm — "made in Japan" was synonymous with products that were cheap and shoddy. You might see an occasional sports car on the road — Ford's Thunderbird or Chevrolet's Corvette — but the vast majority of customers chose from sedans, convertibles, and station wagons made by General Motors, Ford, or Chrysler.

The typical American city of 1963 had appallingly little choice in things to eat. In a large city, you would be able to find a few restaurants serving Americanized Chinese food, a few Italian restaurants serving spaghetti and pizza, and a few restaurants with a French name, which probably meant that they had French onion soup on the menu. But if you were looking for a nice little Szechuan dish or linguine with pesto or sautéed foie gras, forget it. A Thai curry? The first Thai restaurant in the entire nation wouldn't open for another eight years. Sushi? Raw fish? Are you kidding?

On this Thursday, November 21, television's prime-time lineup included The Flintstones, The Donna Reed Show, My Three Sons, Perry Mason, and The Perry Como Show, but it was the 14th-rated show, Dr. Kildare, that made Time magazine's recommended viewing. The story that week involved a pregnant unmarried teen who had gotten an abortion. She was so psychologically shattered by the experience that even Dr. Kildare couldn't help. He had to refer her to a psychiatrist in another CBS program, The Eleventh Hour, for an episode that would air a week later.

She shouldn't have gotten pregnant in the first place, of course. Getting pregnant without being married was wrong; and if a girl did get pregnant then she and the boyfriend who had gotten her in that fix were supposed to get married. If she didn't get married, she should put the baby up for adoption. These were conventional views shared across the political spectrum. As of 1963, Americans continued to obey those norms with remarkable consistency. The percentage of births to single women, known as "the illegitimacy ratio," had been rising worrisomely among Negroes (the only respectful word for referring to African Americans in 1963). But among whites, the illegitimacy ratio was only 3 percent, about where it had been throughout the century.

Marriage was nearly universal and divorce was rare across all races. In the 1963 Current Population Survey, a divorced person headed just 3.5 percent of American households, with another 1.6 percent headed by a separated person. Nor did it make much difference how much education a person had: the marriage percentages for college grads and high school dropouts were about the same.

Not only were Americans almost always married, mothers normally stayed at home to raise their children. More than 80 percent of married women with young children were not working outside the home in 1963. When Americans watched The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet (it was still going strong in 1963, at 26th place in the ratings), they were looking...
at a family structure that the vast majority of them recognized from their own experience, whether they were white or black and whether they were working class, middle class, or rich.

An irony of *Ozzie and Harriet* was that the real Harriet Nelson was herself a working mother (she was a show-business veteran who played herself on the show). Another irony: It wasn’t clear that Ozzie did work—or at least the show never disclosed what Ozzie did for a living. But he had to be doing something. Rich or poor, it was not socially respectable to be adult, male, and idle. And so it was that 98 percent of civilian men in their 30s and 40s reported to government interviewers that they were in the labor force, either working or seeking work. The numbers had looked like that ever since the government had begun asking the question.

Whether television was portraying loving traditional families or pointing with alarm to the perils of breaking the code, television was a team player. It was taken for granted that television programs were supposed to validate the standards that were commonly accepted as part of “the American way of life”—a phrase that was still in common use in 1963.

The film industry chafed under that obligation more than the television networks did, but it mostly went along. Few relics of a half century ago seem more antiquated than the constraints under which filmmakers operated. If filmmakers in 1963 wanted the approval of the Production Code of the Motion Picture Association of America, which almost all of them still did, the dialogue could not include any profanity stronger than *hell* or *damn*, and there had better be good dramatic justification even for them.

Characters couldn’t take the name of the Lord in vain, or ridicule religion, or use any form of obscenity—meaning just about anything related to the sex act. Actors couldn’t be seen naked or even near naked, nor could they dance in a way that bore any resemblance to a sexual action. The plot couldn’t present sex outside marriage as attractive or justified. Homosexuality was to be presented as a perversion. Abortion? “The subject of abortion shall be discouraged, shall never be more than suggested, and when referred to shall be condemned,” said the code.

There had been pushes against the Production Code before November 1963. Movies like *Elmer Gantry* and *Lolita* had managed to get code approval despite forbidden themes, and a few pictures had been released without approval, notably *Man with the Golden Arm*, *Anatomy of a Murder*, and *Some Like It Hot*. A British production that made every sort of licentiousness look like fun, *Tom Jones*, had opened in October. But the top-grossing American-made movies of 1963—*How the West Was Won*, *Cleopatra*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *The Great Escape*, *Charade*—still fit squarely within the moral world prescribed by the Production Code.

Freedom of expression in literature was still a live issue. A federal court decision in 1959 had enjoined the Post Office from confiscating copies of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, and...
and *Fanny Hill* sent through the mails, but many state laws were still on the books. Just a week earlier, a court in Manhattan had heard a case testing a New York State law that prohibited selling any book that “exploits, is devoted to, or is made up of descriptions of illicit sex or sexual immorality.” Did *Fanny Hill* fall into that category? Without a doubt, said the three-judge panel. It was well written, the court acknowledged, but “filth, even if wrapped in the finest packaging, is still filth.”

Part of the reason for these widely shared values lay in the religiosity of America in 1963. A Gallup poll taken in October asked as two of its background questions the interviewee’s religious preference and whether he or she had attended church in the last seven days (note the wording in 1963—“church” not “church or synagogue” or “worship service”). Only one percent of respondents said they did not have a religious preference, and half said they had attended a worship service in the last seven days. These answers showed almost no variation across classes. Poor or rich, high school dropout or college graduate, the percentages of Americans who said they were religious believers and had recently attended a worship service were close to identical.

Hollywood had especially elaborate restrictions on the way that criminal activity could be portrayed, amounting to a stipulation that movies must always show that crime doesn’t pay. But to most Americans, that didn’t seem odd. By 1963, crime had been low for many years. In large swaths of America, doors were routinely left unlocked, children were allowed to move around the neighborhood unsupervised, and, except in the toughest neighborhoods of the largest cities, it seldom occurred to someone walking alone at night to worry about muggers.

The nation’s prisons held only a fraction of the inmates they would hold by 2010, but clearance rates for crimes and the probability of prison time if convicted for a felony were both high. And so we have this paradox compared to later years: crime was low and few people had ever been in prison, even in low-income neighborhoods, but most of the people in those neighborhoods who regularly committed crimes ended up in jail. People weren’t being naive to believe that crime didn’t pay. By and large, it really didn’t.

As for illegal drugs, we cannot put hard numbers to the prevalence of use—surveys on drug use wouldn’t begin until the late 1970s—but there certainly wasn’t much happening that attracted the attention of the police. In 1963, there were just 18 arrests for drug abuse violations per 100,000 Americans, compared to 1,284 per 100,000 for drunkenness. As of 1963, people drank like fish and smoked like chimneys, but illegal drugs were rare and exotic.
A
merica still had plenty of problems on November 21, 1963. The greatest of all, the one that had been eating at the vitals of the American body politic ever since the founders couldn't bring themselves to condemn slavery in the Declaration of Independence, was the status of African Americans. In 1963, the South was still such a thoroughly segregated society that whether the segregation was de jure or de facto didn't make much practical difference. In the North, the laws supporting segregation were gone, but neighborhoods and schools in urban areas were segregated in practice. The racial differences in income, education, and occupations were all huge. The Civil Rights Movement was the biggest domestic issue of the early 1960s, and it was underwritten by a moral outrage that had begun among blacks but was rapidly raising the consciousness of white America as well.

The status of American women in 1963 had not yet led to a movement, but there was much to be outraged about. Almost as many girls as boys had enrolled in college in the spring of 1963, but thereafter the discrepancies grew. That same year, there were 1.4 male college graduates for every female, two master’s degrees awarded to males for every one that went to a female, and eight PhDs that went to males for every one that went to a female. Worse than that were the expectations. Teaching and nursing were still two of the only occupations in which women received equal treatment and opportunity, and the women who did enter male-dominated professions could expect to put up with a level of sexual harassment that would prompt large summary damage awards in the 2000s. The vast majority of men took it for granted that women were expected to get married, cook the meals, keep the house clean, raise the children, and cater to the husband. Women who didn't were oddballs.

Pollution was a dreadful problem in many urban areas. The smog in Los Angeles was often a visible miasma hanging over the city, and less visible pollution was just as dangerously a presence in the nation's lakes and rivers.

And there was the problem that within a year would become a focal point of national domestic policy: poverty. The official poverty line didn't exist yet—it was in the process of being invented by the economist Mollie Orshansky and her colleagues at the Social Security Administration—but when that definition of poverty was retrospectively calculated for 1963, it would be determined that almost 20 percent of the American people were below the poverty line. And yet poverty was still on the periphery of the policy agenda. The reason was more complicated than obtuseness or indifference, and it goes to the strategic optimism that still prevailed in 1963: Poverty had been dropping so rapidly for so many years that Americans thought things were going well. Economists have since reconstructed earlier poverty rates using decennial census data, and determined that 41 percent of Americans were still below the poverty line in 1949. A drop from 41 percent to less than 20 percent in just 14 years was a phenomenal achievement. No one knew those numbers yet, but the reality of the progress they represent helps explain why the average American wasn't exercised about poverty in 1963. Things had been getting better economically in ways that were evident in everyday life.

That kind of progress also helps explain why, if you took polling data at face value, America...
didn’t have a lower class or an upper class in 1963. In the responses to a Gallup poll taken that fall, 95 percent of the respondents said they were working class (50 percent) or middle class (45 percent). A great many poor people were refusing to identify themselves as lower class, and a great many affluent people were refusing to identify themselves as upper class. Those refusals reflected a national conceit that had prevailed from the beginning of the nation: America didn’t have classes, or, to the extent that it did, Americans should act as if we didn’t.

As Walter Cronkite ended the broadcast on November 21 with his newly coined sign-off, “That’s the way it is,” he had no way of knowing that he was within hours of a career-changing event. The grainy videotape of the special bulletins, with Cronkite’s ashen face and his carefully dispassionate voice saying that the news was official, the president was dead, fiddling with his glasses, trying to hide that he was blinking away tears, would become the iconic image of how the nation got the news.

Nor could he, nor any of his audience, have had any way of knowing how much America was about to change, in everything—its politics, economy, technology, high culture, popular culture, and civic culture.

In other ways, the assassination provides a marker coinciding with changes that were going to happen anyway. Many of the landmark reforms of the 1960s were produced by Supreme Court decisions, not the president or Congress, and the activist supermajority on that court was already established. Seven of the judges sitting on the court when Kennedy died were there throughout the next six years of historic decisions.

A sexual revolution of some sort was inevitable by November 21, 1963. The first oral contraceptive pill had gone on the market in 1960 and its use was spreading rapidly. Of course sexual mores would be profoundly changed when, for the first time in human history, women had a convenient and reliable way to ensure that they could have sex without getting pregnant, even on the spur of the moment and with no cooperation from the man.

Almost 20 percent of the American people were below the poverty line.

A revolution of some sort in the fortunes of African Americans was inevitable. The Civil Rights Movement had been intensifying for a decade and had reached its moral apogee with the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, which filled the Mall with a quarter of a million people and concluded with Martin Luther King Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech. The precise shape of the legislation and regulatory regime to implement the revolution were probably different under Johnson than they would have been under Kennedy, but momentum for major change in 1963 was already too great to stop.
Something resembling the War on Poverty would probably have been proposed in 1964, no matter what. Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* had appeared in the spring of 1962 proclaiming that 40 to 50 million Americans were living in poverty and that their poverty was structural—it would not be cured by economic growth. Kennedy had read the book, or at least some laudatory reviews of it, and ordered the staff work that would later be used by Johnson in formulating his War on Poverty. How many programs Kennedy could have actually passed is another question, but Harrington’s thesis was already being taken up by the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and would have become part of the policy debate even without the assassination.

Other movements that would have sweeping impact on American society were already nascent in 1963. Early in the year, Betty Friedan had published *The Feminine Mystique*, seen now as the opening salvo of the feminist movement. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* had appeared in 1962 and become a *New York Times* best seller, setting off public interest that would lead to the environmental movement. Ralph Nader had written his first attack on the auto industry in the *Nation*, and two years later would found the consumer advocate movement with *Unsafe at Any Speed*.

The cultural landscape of the Sixties was already taking shape in 1963. Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “A Hard Rain’s a Gonna Fall,” and “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right”—all theme songs for what we think of as the Sixties—had been released six months before Kennedy died. In November 1963, the Beatles had played for the queen, were the hottest group in England, and were planning their first US tour.

And history had already swallowed the demographic pig. The leading cohorts of the baby boomers were in their teens by November 21, 1963, and, for better or worse, they were going to be who they were going to be. No one understood at the time what a big difference it could make if one age group of a population was abnormally large.

Everyone was about to find out.

A graduate of Harvard, with a doctorate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Charles Murray is the W. H. Brady Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. This is taken from the introduction of his recent book, Coming Apart, published earlier this year by Crown Forum.
“We are enveloped by the world not only spatially but temporally—caught up, empowered, given room in that which is coming from some source and going somewhere.”

A n upper-level administrator at the university telephoned me at home. I had been repairing something in the basement, and my hand, I saw, left a smear of grease on the phone. The administrator asked me about a fellow professor who was a candidate for a deanship; he had served for a time as an associate dean. What did I think of him?

I was unprepared. The call was completely unexpected. Knowing I had to say something, I began by itemizing his attractive traits. It was not just that this was the civil thing to do, but that I had a clear picture of what these traits were, whereas the negative ones, I had never been able to focus clearly. What was the reservation that brooded like a cloud around my thoughts but would not coalesce in a definite image?

I went on with the positive traits. Yes, he was a bright person, industrious, well prepared in his scholarly specialty, got on well with his colleagues, did not flaunt his power and use it in a coercive or a condescending manner, and had a certain human touch—in the sense that he could shift gears when pressure was building in a situation and relief was needed.

The administrator agreed and paused expectantly.

What was my reservation? I tried to buy time with any words which might conceivably be relevant. The reservation in the background would not crystallize into a figure. He waited expectantly, sensing there was more I wanted to say.

Suddenly the answer came—in the form of an emphatic image: boxes with numbers in them. In the Activity Reports which we professors must submit at the end of each year, there are boxes for numbers to quantify our “productiv-
difficult to find numbers to evaluate achievement in teaching. I didn’t think that the candidate had any notion of how to judge important contributions teachers make.

With this a vast and tempting region opened. It contained all the issues we seldom discuss, do not know how to evaluate precisely, and have no boxes for. What is the point of educating people in the first place? Because it is good that we be developed in this way. Goodness? But how could I talk about goodness in the few moments given me to answer his question about the candidate?

I faltered and hesitated, longing to leap into this area, but knowing it was hopeless to try. He quickly interposed, thanked me for my efforts, remained noncommittal, and closed the conversation.

I returned to the basement, and soon a suspicion became a conviction. Probably the administrator was himself only interested in the numbers in these boxes—but I think he grasps little beyond the numbers themselves, I said. He does not grasp what the numbers in the boxes refer to in the world of human intercourse and activity, what the numbers mean. What does it mean, in human terms, to write one of that sort of thing—book—any book? Then, faced with the question, “How many books have you written in the last five years?” how would he judge the difference between one professor’s answer when “One” refers to a slim volume of great imaginative power which may change the course of civilization, and another’s answer of “Two” which refers to scholarly, well-reviewed, but pedestrian books? It seemed to me that he does not know the difference between the numbers, because he does not know the difference between the books to which the numbers refer.

The administrator made no sound, so I went on.

I said the candidate was brilliant at assembling “hard data” on personnel, and I talked about other boxes. He knows, I said, the number for “How many citations of Professor X’s work by professional peers in that academic field have occurred ‘in the literature’ in the last year.” But why, I asked, do we place confidence in this number? Do we forget that much of the most creative work has gone unrecognized at the time? Some thinkers die unnoticed, others are vilified in their lifetimes. How would they have fared in the boxes of our Activity Reports?

The administrator was himself an historian, and I thought that last point would impress him. But he made no sound, and I rushed to say something else. We ought to remember also, I said, that Socrates and Jesus seem not to have written or published anything. It is immensely
a particular academic field could hope to know what the numbers in the boxes referred to, what a book or an article meant—and probably that the outsider ought not even to try to grasp this, for that might derail the fragile coordination necessary for the survival of the many-armed and many-headed thing that the university is.

I became depressed.

This situation cannot be blamed simply on the ignorance or laziness of certain administrators. An underlying reason why business is done in shorthand, the numbers confined in their boxes, is that the university research to which the numbers refer falls into disconnected sectors. All academic fields presuppose truth, otherwise why try to discover anything? Scientists conceive of truth in a narrow, technical sense which is linked to their ability to make quantifiable predictions and to test them with precision instruments. This has proven to be highly productive for science. But what of the claim that there is truth to be discovered also in literature, for example? Typically such “truths” do not involve quantifiable predictions which can be tested with precision instruments, so the single word truth cannot hide a disparity of meaning which prevents the different fields from connecting or even contrasting their discoveries.

Yet all of us knowers and researchers in our different academic departments are in the business of educating ourselves and our students. Education involves a simple but basic assumption: that the self cannot be divorced from its evaluation of itself. “Where do I stand in the world?” “What has my life amounted to?” “What might I become?” So if we cannot compare and connect the discoveries we knowers and researchers make, we are hampered, even crippled in our role as educators, because we cannot orient ourselves and our students in the world. With only bits and pieces of knowledge we risk getting lost, unguided by what in truth is good for us to become.

In literature, and in the fastnesses of experience—religious experience, for example—the term “good” “talks” to us on the inner level of the self. But it cannot be taken in as a whole by science and defined in the required precise and predictive sense; so it cannot figure in the truths scientists discover. Science by itself cannot tell us how to educate, not even how to educate as persons those who are to be scientists. In fact, although science is considered the paramount way of knowing, it cannot establish what nearly everyone assumes: that it itself is good.

If we cannot know whether what we do is good for human beings, we cannot be confident in our evaluation of ourselves as educators. It is understandable that we be captivated by boxes full of numbers floating on a page.

My conversation with the administrator occurred in 1972. Since then the conviction has spread that something is wrong with our research universities as educational institutions. Because we are growing, developing beings we ask questions about who we are and what we
ought to become that the highly specialized and partitioned university can find no place within itself to raise and consider. There are university newspapers and magazines. There are also faculty meetings, but these and the printed organs seldom provide a place for communication about education because the vocabularies of those involved mix defectively. Typically, faculty meetings are preoccupied with procedural matters—problems of coordinating modules connected only bureaucratically.

The various parts of the great university stand out, clearly and boldly outlined. But when I search within them (the departments within the colleges, the colleges within the university, the administration buildings, classroom buildings, stadia, libraries, dorms, milling students), trying to find a place within the scene to ask the questions about goodness that seem so essential, I cannot find it. Amidst all the reality of the university there is no place for the reality of the questions or of the questioner. Consequently the components of the university, as I experience them, float away—one at a time or in bunches—like items in a dream, or components of a surrealist movie set being flown around by a giant crane. Each of the parts has a clear definition and can be picked out, but the university itself, the vital unit, disappears.

There is a cry for change, and interdisciplinary programs spring up in nearly every university; faculty committees are assembled to pick a “core curriculum”: what every educated person should know. We are caught up in transition. But the causes of the university’s illness are systemic and obscure, I think, historical and institutional, and tied in with our most obscure assumptions about the nature of truth and knowledge, and of the self and world to be known. Causes most difficult to discover! Why do we now conceive truth and knowledge in a way that obscures sectors of our own selves? As Nietzsche put it, “We knowers are unknown to ourselves.”

As directly lived, the world is not experienced as divided into boxes, but as one vast, supremely great whole. Attention abstracts and selects, from a moody and vague background, an immediate sense of the encompassing world and ourselves in it—lingering, habitual orientations for living, inherited from archaic personal or communal pasts. This background may be vague, but if we are to feel solid and real it must be felt to be coherent. Marginally but potently sensed as background of all we are and do, the world exudes a pervasive, moody meaning and quality: if it is odious and fearsome to me, I will live in a withdrawn and fearful way; if attractive and supportive, I will live confidently. As we form meaning in interaction with the englobing world, present both in the focus of our attention and in the abiding and moody background, we form ourselves.

As if it were a laser focusing attention randomly, the university cuts across and eclipses
life be one life, integral, valuable, meaningful, as an immediately lived whole opening onto the future.

In a brilliant chapter of his *The Abolition of Man*—"Men Without Chest"—C. S. Lewis points out the split made in persons committed to psycho-physical dualism, and to the historyless view of reality as point-instant ideas inherited from the 17th century. As we tend to conceive ourselves, human reality is located either in the head—in consciousness—or in the stomach or groin. There is nothing in between, no locus in the chest for the moral virtues, which are neither purely physical nor purely mental, but human rather, the heart of a complex creature who must be grounded and rooted in some way in human history and the continuous background of the world. For Greek thought the moral virtues are located in the chest: courage, piety, temperance, wisdom, justice.

Without energy and empowerment the moral virtues are ineffectual, and it is just the heart that supplies this, for it involves us in the immediately lived, engulfing world, bonding us emotionally to others and our common fate. Without heart we are not plugged in to the dynamism of all that lives and endures around us; and the heart does have reasons that the reason knows nothing of. Verbalisms and formulae generate power technologically, but that is not sufficient. We also need directly engaged presence, and the sensuous images of presence which stay embedded in our bodies.

the human background. It cannot facilitate the education of human beings who thrust toward integrated, vital being within a horizon of possibility. What lies in the background of the university itself that explains its obfuscation and pulverization of our experience?

The new human institution which burst on the world scene with such momentous impact, the great research university, is old at heart. For it is in the knowledge business, and the conception of knowledge which it accepts largely determines its institutional structure and its conception of the knowers. In a real sense, it finds no room for us as integral beings in an integral world, for as it grasps us it splits us into minds and bodies.

Through a leap of abstraction from the immediately lived world—a leap which is made and then forgotten—the world is divided by 17th-century thought into material bodies and weightless minds, objective and subjective. The 20th-century university is fractured into sciences and humanities, with only the former thought to deliver objective meaning and truth. Thoughts about goodness, or beauty, tend to be reduced to mere expressions of subjective sentiment and opinion. What is abstracted from, the supremely singular background world, is ignored. But only within this can a
The shaman knows something that the technologist forgets at his—and our—peril.

Vaguely and archaically, but fundamentally, we are enveloped by the world not only spatially but temporally—caught up, empowered, given room in that which is coming from some source and going somewhere. This experience is now threatened by a technologized and profession-

Persons wonder if they can know themselves, and if they can direct themselves intelligently.

alized culture in which attention is focused on objects to be manipulated for some immediately understandable gain, rather than on the surrounding world moving us—a fixed and constricted attention in which numbers easily lose their ties to the actuality and presence of what is numbered and afloat in their boxes.

To put it starkly, modern history begins in the 17th century with the death of history as previously conceived: “his-story,” humankind’s attempts to make sense of it all in terms of fundamental feelings, stories, and images—"mythological" accounts—of the ever-recurring order of everything. This pervasive, continuous, emotional storytelling, spinning the fabric of the person’s and the group’s identity, tended to be equated with superstition, fairy tales, mere myths.

We detect the fundamental irony of the modern world since Newton and Descartes, which affects the university in a crucial way: A sure foundation is supplied for mathematical, mechanistic physics, and on this basis technologies of all kinds are grounded, and in the space of only a few centuries the whole earth and our lives are transformed—the other animals driven into obscure corners or annihilated. Yet, at the same time, persons wonder whether they can know themselves and whether they can direct themselves intelligently and achieve meaning, self-respect, dignity.

As 17th-century science deposits itself in our lives today, it paves over but cannot replace the common matrix of prescientific storytelling and image making which supplied orientation, moral guidance, energy, and worth for countless generations knit up as integral beings within an integral world. But they were more than stories, since they were not contrasted invidiously to scientific truth. For example, Penelope’s faithfulness in waiting years for Ulysses, or David’s courage in facing Goliath. These images of faithfulness and courage, taken in habitually, inform and gird the self, imparting to it solidity and continuity.

Along with this perpetual storytelling was the practice of the traditional healing arts, which involved the most intimate and trusting contact between the individual and the community. However defective these arts might have been—understood scientifically—they imparted continuity and meaning to the community and its members. And in some cases they may have produced cures we can no longer imagine.

Human reality, self-knowledge, truth, goodness? These are philosophical
questions. Don’t we have professional philosophers ready to handle them? It is symptomatic of the university’s malaise, its distance from the common concerns of humans to build lives for themselves, that philosophers tend to be isolated in highly technical, verbalistic communication with professional fellows. The complexity and expertness of their language is the problem. Engrossed in it, questions about its scope and competence are masked out. Truth tends to be construed as a property of accurate statements, ones that can be manipulated in complex arguments. But is self-knowledge and self-direction mainly a matter of making true statements about ourselves and arguing? It is preposterous to think so.

To be educators is to seek some minimal community and aim, some shared practice and basic vocabulary, and to require of philosophy some special contribution to this.

At the end of the last century, coincidentally with the formation of modern universities along scientific lines established since the 17 century, William James wrote of the “scientific nightmare”: In the ordinary nightmare we have motives but no power. In the scientific nightmare we have power but no motives (“Rationality, Activity, and Faith,” 1882). That is, we now have great power and can work technological wonders, but why do anything when we cannot know whether the ends to which we direct our power are really good? The danger is to fall either into compulsive, frenzied effort or into paralysis and boredom. (James’ observation did not deter university builders.)

If we cannot make sense of the world and our place within it and find something good and joyous about being alive, then nothing else matters. All desires pale beside this one, and if the price for meaning is the relinquishment of subsidiary desires we will pay this price, won’t we? At least it is a question. For we possess the capacity to freely suppress desires if necessary, and ego and wishful thinking on occasion, and to stand by whatever truth we discover—no matter how strange or repellent it may seem—which is pertinent to being fully alive.

To exercise this capacity to freely seek truth, and to take responsibility for holding to it, is making sense of our lives, isn’t it; is self-respect, is being fully alive? How can we respect ourselves if we find nothing that takes us out of ourselves—nothing we revere for its wholeness, inclusiveness, greatness, and to which we might belong? Mustn’t we know in our hearts what goodness is? But can we? We have powerful means of altering the earth and ourselves, but only a fix on goodness could give our means their aim, support, and meaning—give us meaning. What can we reasonably expect of the university in this time of need?

I believe that education is a moral enterprise and that the contemporary research university lacks moral direction. Amidst all our stunning discoveries we have forgotten, I think, what it means to be a human being in the world. Also of course what it means to be a good one. We tend to treat ourselves and our students abstractly, as if we were divided into bodies and minds. With this goes a heartless bureaucracy, modules of the university boxed up in themselves: the administration takes the body—it houses, feeds, shuttles bodies about—the faculty takes the minds—it pumps into them information and
talking about fairy tales, but a way of knowing that can be imaginative). This means that we cannot make sense of ourselves as beings who can freely form ideas and take responsibility for whatever truth we find; that we cannot make sense of ourselves sucked into the vacuum of possibility—that vacuum essential to our substance. If Nietzsche is right, this is unfaithfulness to ourselves, a wild “creativity,” an urge for destruction.

In sum I argue that the self’s identity is formed through basic engagements and bondings in the world, whether these are acknowledged or not. The recognitions professors get from professionalized academic authorities, model knowers, contribute crucially to the matrix formative of self. At the same time, they conceal the depth and scope of the matrix. Behind “current standards of professional competence,” archaic energies of identity formation are at work. When professors are accepted into professional groups, primitive initiation and purification rites are performed unacknowledgeably which establish individual and corporate identity by contrasting members invidiously to outsiders. But to be cut off from others, especially those whom we generate, our children and our students, is to be cut off from ourselves as adults and teachers, and from a possibility of our own regeneration. Evading awareness of what we are doing is evading responsibility to our larger ongoing community; this is unfaithfulness both to others and ourselves. It is destructive.

If we would restore the university to its educational and moral course we must rethink what it means to be a human being. We must plot the course that science and technology have followed—and professionalism and bureaucracy (even in the university); this drifting belief that we cannot achieve meaning and truth about the human condition as a whole, that we can tell no life-forming story about what we are and what we ought be that is compatible with truth (we are not techniques, and spends much of its time looking beyond the university altogether, seeking authorization from professional peers nationwide.

Split up, unrecognized as whole persons, many undergraduates feel alienated from their professors. In a survey of 5000 conducted by the Carnegie Foundation 52 percent stated that they were “treated like numbers in a book” and 42 percent did not believe that their professors were personally interested in their progress. I believe that this poll underestimates alienation, for many students have never known a good educational experience—imaginative, supportive, stimulating, crackling with intelligence—so that they have nothing to which to compare their experience. And students cannot be alienated from professors without professors being alienated from students.

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These are tough times and everyone knows it. The mood is sour. The Tea Party and the Occupy Wall Street movement exemplify public angst. There is a sense that the American people have been let down by partisan politics and Wall Street deceit.

Management of debt has become the dominant problem for the American family, the federal government, and most states and communities. There is a vibrant, not always well articulated, debate about how or whether the economy can be stimulated from Washington. Traditional Keynesian economists suggest that when government is faced with an economic downturn or a national security challenge, it should press the fiscal levers. Acolytes of Milton Friedman and the Viennese-born economist Friedrich Hayek, on the other hand, argue caution, especially on raising taxes.

Both sides of the policy debate are confronted with more limited options as the total debt burden climbs. At some point, debt accumulation becomes unmanageable. No economist knows where the breaking point is because in the final measure nation-states operate in a market economy. It is public confidence that determines the marketability and pricing of debt. What we do know is that the costs of government are bound to escalate as debt obligations place an increasing claim on national resources and as a higher proportion of the population reaches retirement age.

In addition, we know that the hangover from this past decade’s fiscal decision making cannot be ducked. For the first time in our or perhaps any country’s history, taxes were cut in wartime, and no shared economic sacrifice was called for. The cost of military intervention in two Islamic countries—our two longest wars—
as well as the cost associated with attacks from the air in four others have been passed on to future generations. The result is that a year ago we raised approximately 15 percent of the GDP in taxes and spent 25 percent. These are unsustainable figures.

This brings us to the increasingly surreal world of Washington politics and the fiscal decisions that affect all elements of the federal budget.

What is so troubling is that the judgmental differences that are worthy of respect are exacerbated by partisanship that undercut the capacity of governing bodies even to make decisions. Too many are looking at politics as a game to win rather than a challenge to lead.

Under President Reagan, the last president to modify the underpinnings of Social Security, a combination approach was taken: the age of retirement was gradually raised, the formula for cost of living raises was adjusted slightly downward, and the income levels on which Social Security taxes are levied were moved upwards. The judgment in Congress and the executive branch at the time was that this combination approach entailed fair and balanced sacrifice on the part of working Americans and their employers who share the burden of paying Social Security taxes, and retirees who depend on the dedicated transfer of tax dollars. Of all our challenges, the retirement income aspect of Social Security remains the most manageable. Unfortunately, in today’s politics it is unclear whether a balanced effort akin to the kind arrived at in the Ronald Reagan-Tip O’Neill era can be repeated.

The bigger fiscal trauma is health care, a subject upon which I am far from an expert. But, it is self-evident that there are equity problems in health-care delivery and that the lack of discipline in health-care costs is weakening the overall economy. We are the only country in the world in which health-care costs are a double digit percentage of the GDP—now approaching 17 percent—a figure which contrasts starkly with the 5 percent of GDP that health care represented when John F. Kennedy assumed office.

I mention this subject and these figures because when defense spending and interest on the national debt are excluded, it is Social Security and health care that are the principal cost drivers of the federal budget, and it is Medicaid that is the single most bedeviling cost element in the appropriations process of most state governments. I also mention it because many businesspeople will tell you that it is health-care costs rather than salary considerations that often drive corporate decisions to outsource jobs.

These seemingly extraneous macro-economic considerations are noted to underscore the fragility of our country’s economy and our government’s fiscal picture. The assumption that jobs are the number one issue for most Americans is valid; a conclusion, however, that the liberal arts are not critical to job creation is mistaken. Indeed, such a conclusion could too easily lead to policy prescriptions that undercut American competitiveness and the national interest itself.
One of the myths of our time is that the humanities are good for the soul but irrelevant to the pocketbook. Actually, they are central to long-term American competitiveness. It is true that many jobs, such as in the construction trades, are skill based, but job creation itself requires an understanding of community and the world. Change and its acceleration characterize the times. With each passing year, jobs evolve, become more sophisticated. Training for one skill set may be of little assistance for another. On the other hand, studies that stimulate the imagination and nourish capacities to analyze and think outside the box are well-suited to the challenges of change. They make coping with the unprecedented an achievable endeavor.

What is needed in a world in flux is a new understanding of the meaning of the basics in education. Traditionally, the basics are about the three R’s, which in Iowa City are sometimes defined as “readin’, ‘ritin’, and ‘restin’.” However defined, they are critical. Nonetheless, they are insufficient. What are also needed are the studies that provide perspective on our times and foster citizen understanding of their own communities, other cultures, and the creative process. To understand and compete in the world we need a fourth R, which for lack of a precise moniker might be described as “reality”—which includes not only relevant knowledge of the world near and far but the imaginative capacity to put oneself in the shoes of others and creatively apply knowledge to discrete endeavors.

Note thinking is the hallmark of the status quo. Stimulating the imagination is the key to the future. As individuals we all try to make sense of our own odysseys through life. Our “universe” is small in relation not only to the solar system but to the communities in which we live. But wherever we might be, we are affected by global events, whether related to the challenges of national security or the global hiring hall. In this insecure geopolitical environment, a deeper comprehension of the fourth R (reality) has never been more important. It is essential to revitalizing the American productive engine and inspiring thoughtful citizenship.

A skeptic once suggested that the humanities are little more than studies of flaws in human nature. Actually they uplift on the one hand and warn on the other. The power of a few to commit acts of societal destruction and the contrasting capacity of a few to precipitate uplifting change has grown exponentially in the past century. Two contrasting examples provide contemporary illustrations, Azar Nafisi, the author of Reading Lolita in Téhran, points out that little strikes greater fear in the hearts of despots than the humanities. They are anathema to tyrants because they liberate the mind. It is not surprising that in the wake of civil unrest several years ago, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that humanities
nations is directly related to the temperance of statecraft.

It is also related to the depth of knowledge applied to decision making. This is no time to put the brakes on humanities studies or toy with anti-intellectualism. In reviewing, for example, our decision to go to war in Iraq, it is apparent that inadequate attention to cultural issues may have cost lives as well as money. Yes, there was an “intelligence” failure related to misjudgments about Iraq’s nuclear capacities. But the greatest “intelligence” failure was our lack of understanding of the region, its people, and their religions.

For instance, despite having gone to war in the Persian Gulf a decade earlier, Congress and executive branch policymakers understood little of the Sunni/Shi’a divide when 9/11 hit. Likewise, despite the French experience in Algeria and the British and Russian in Afghanistan, we had little comprehension of the depth of Islamic antipathy to foreign occupation. Nor, despite the tactics of a Daniel Boone-style patriot named Francis Marion, the Swamp Fox, who attacked British garrisons at night during the Revolutionary War and then vanished in South Carolina swamps during the day, we had little sense for the effectiveness of asymmetric warfare.

courses in Iran must be purged to reflect only government-approved dogma.

To watch what appears to be an historic progressive revolution take shape in Cairo’s Tahrir Square this past year is to understand why oppressors have such reason to fear the humanities. To them, the danger is self-evident:

The minds and souls of people have to be better understood.

a free thinking people will be tempted to lead their leaders. One liberated mind, a young college graduate, Gigi Ibrahim, was interviewed on the Daily Show about why she became involved in the protests against her government. The answer she gave Jon Stewart was that she was inspired by taking a class at the American University in Cairo on social issues and reform movements. Ideas manifested themselves into ideals; and history, she found, provided the power of example. Individuals with convictions could stand up to tyranny.

Precedents can be instructive, but less so when the world in which we live has so many unprecedented problems, political as well as economic. Civilization, for instance, is on trial from two extremes: the looming prospect that weapons of mass destruction could be unleashed, and the reality that the more advanced and open a society, the more vulnerable it is to terrorism. Seldom, therefore, has it been more important for individuals in public life to appeal to the better angels rather than the baser instincts of the body politic. Whether the issues are social or economic, domestic or international, the temptation to appeal to the darker side of human nature must be avoided. The stakes are too high. The duty of public officials is to inspire hope rather than to manipulate fear. The health of
Policymakers have to recognize that political traumas of the moment are surface issues that can be understood only in relation to underlying cultural bases: the customs, history, literature, philosophy, religion, and sometimes myths of a country or people. Such considerations are critical to devising approaches to avoid conflict, to prosecuting a war if conflict cannot be avoided, and to ending any conflict in such a way as to lessen the prospect of a similar conflict emerging again.

For decades, military strategists have wisely talked of the need to think through the hazards of exit strategies when war is contemplated. But concerns about how to end a war seldom get more than passing attention when planning for war commences. To the degree exit strategies are initially considered, the theoretical planning generally encompasses institutional and logistical concerns more than cultural considerations. Yet, to lead the world in this century it is the human condition, the culture and history of countries, the minds and souls of peoples that are going to have to be better understood.

National security involves more than military preparedness. It begins at home, not only in relation to the making of policy judgments but with regard to the respect or lack thereof accorded diverse cultural groups. The advancing of mutual respect is central to relations between states and peoples. As an immigrant society with family ties to every country across the globe, we are watched closely. How we speak about others and assimilate elements of our own society affect whether peoples around the world view us as a beacon of hope and opportunity or a wellspring of prejudice.

For many, concern for civility seems either unimportant or sanctimonious. Actually, civility is an enduring virtue of civilized society. At issue is how individuals interrelate in community and how societies make decisions that can affect life on the planet. For the ancient Greeks, civility involved a bond of polis, a sharing of principles and a commitment to live justly within a city-state. Today, civility remains the heart of civilization. It provides the prospect of avoiding, dampening, even resolving conflict, whether in the neighborhood or in the international arena.

Civility is not simply or principally about numbers. And it doesn't mean that spirited advocacy is to be avoided. Indeed, argumentation is a social good. Without argumentation there is a tendency to dogmatism, even tyranny. What civility does require is a willingness to consider respectfully the views of others, with an understanding that we are all connected and rely on each other. Seldom is there only one proper path determinable by one individual, one political party, or one nation-state. But public decision making does not lend itself to certitude. And that is why humility is a valued character trait and why civility is an essential component of civil society.
In an American setting, citizens should be expected to disagree vigorously with each other and take their differences ultimately to the ballot box. But the outcome that matters most in the wake of an election is whether, despite rival ambitions, the prevailing candidates have the fortitude to work together for the national interest. A government of, by, and for the people is obligated to conduct the nation’s business in a manner that respects contrasting views and those who hold them. If all men and women are created equal, surely it follows that all citizens are entitled to have their views respectfully considered in the public square and, after elections, to have the representatives they choose be open minded and in a position to reflect credibly the judgments of their constituents in governmental decision making.

Politics has high and low moments. Higher moments have been characterized by expansions of political tolerance; lower moments by debilitating political discourse, often accentuated with racial, ethnic, and religious overtones. In the history of the Republic, there have been more troubling challenges than we have witnessed in recent years; and in world affairs, more egregious words have incited humankind to greater misdeeds than America has experienced. Nevertheless, the caustic labeling of public officials as “fascist” or “communist” and the polemical toying with history-blind radicalism—the notion of “secession”—is deeply troubling.

One might ask, what problem is there with political hyperbole? Plenty! Words reflect emotion as well as meaning. They clarify—or cloud—thought and energize action. When rancorous rhetoric is manipulated to divide the American family, the logic becomes the warning. If 400,000 American soldiers gave their lives to defeat fascism, if tens of thousands were lost holding communism at bay, and even more died in a civil war to define and preserve the union, isn’t it a citizen’s obligation to apply perspective to words that contain warring implications?

There is, after all, a difference between holding a particular tax, or spending, or health-care view and asserting that an American who supports another approach, or is a member of a different political party, is an advocate of an “ism” of hate that encompasses gulags and concentration camps. Some frameworks of thought define rival ideas; others, enemies.

The poet Walt Whitman once described America as an “athletic democracy.” What he meant was that the politics of his era was rugged and vigorous and spirited. Anti-immigrant, especially anti-Catholic, sentiment and toleration for human degradation implicit in slavery characterized more than a little of 19th-century American thought and many of our social structures. Indeed, violence was part of 19th-century political manners. In 1804, Vice President Aaron Burr shot dead our greatest Secretary of Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, for suggesting that Burr was “despicable” in a duel, which might be described as a brazen act of legalized incivility. Half a century later, Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina wandered over to the Senate floor and caned unconscious Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts who...
was holding forth on the immorality of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and its sanctioning of slavery in an expanding part of the union. Uncivil behavior is nothing new.

What are new are transformative changes in communications technology, in American politics, and the issues facing humanity. While

America has entered a period of intensifying polarization.

not as passionate a rupture as existed in the 19th century, evidence is mounting (and polls confirm) that America has entered a period of intensifying polarization. Citizens have lost confidence in many institutions of society and are becoming more disrespectful of their leaders, of other faith systems, and of each other. Feisty position taking in the media reflects angst-ridden views of the public and, in turn, gives license to socially divisive assertions across the land. This reinforcing phenomenon—a press increasingly pandering to political constituencies, and constituencies increasingly polarized from each other—accentuates attitudinal rifts in the body politic and invigorates the activist wings of the political parties.

In legislative primaries where a small percentage of the electorate—usually less than 5 percent—control the choice of candidates for the two major parties, the ideological edges routinely overwhelm the citizen center. The consequence of nominating candidates at the edges of the political spectrum is particularly traumatic as legislative bodies become bereft of voices reflecting the concerns of middle American political and social thought. The capacity of legislators to reach common ground is brought into doubt when money concerns and partisan pressures to maintain ideological consistency are dominant considerations. Compromise may have once been the art of politics, but intransigence is the new art of political survival. If an elected official in today’s environment chooses to compromise on an issue, that official becomes vulnerable to a primary challenge. Activists will insist that a “real” liberal or “real” conservative represent their preferred party. The inevitable result: an increase both in radicalism and the frequency of leadership swings.

In Western civilization’s most prophetic poem, “The Second Coming,” William Butler Yeats suggests that the center cannot hold “when the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity.” Yeats was reacting to the seemingly senseless carnage of World War I trench warfare. But the chaos of modernity has produced a crisis of perspective, as well as values, that give his words contemporary relevance. Many of today’s traumas stem from the fast-changing nature of society, which has so many destabilizing elements. But some of the responsibility falls at the feet of politicians and their supporters who use inflammatory rhetoric and
Clausewitz, law making is the continuation of politics in another forum. Electoral politics never stops. It is just interrupted every day or two to count ballots.

Uncivil speech dispirits the soul of society.

Following a long and distinguished career as a representative in the United States Congress, James A. Leach now serves as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.
We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. No, I do not mean the global economic crisis that began in 2008: at least then everyone knew that a crisis was at hand, and many world leaders worked quickly and desperately to find solutions. Indeed, consequences for governments were grave if they did not find solutions, and many were replaced in consequence. No, I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, like a cancer; a crisis that is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government: a worldwide crisis in education.

Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations and their systems of education are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. The future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance.

What are these radical changes? The humanities and the arts are being cut away, in both primary/secondary and college/university education, in virtually every nation of the world. Seen by policymakers as useless frills, at a time when nations must cut away all “useless” things in order to stay competitive in the global market, they are rapidly losing their place in curricula, and also in the minds and hearts of parents and children. Indeed, what we might call the humanistic aspects of science and social science
—the imaginative, creative aspect, and the aspect of rigorous critical thought—are also losing ground as nations prefer to pursue short-term profit by the cultivation of the useful and highly applied skills suited to profit making.

This crisis is facing us, but we have not yet faced it. We go on as if everything were business-as-usual, when in reality great changes of emphasis are evident all over. We haven’t really deliberated about these changes, we have not really chosen them, and yet they increasingly limit our future.

Consider these five examples, deliberately drawn from different nations and different educational levels:

In the fall of 2006, the US Department of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education, headed by Bush administration secretary of education Margaret Spellings, released its report on the state of higher education in the nation: *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. This report contained a valuable critique of unequal access to higher education. When it came to subject matter, however, it focused entirely on education for national economic gain. It concerned itself with perceived deficiencies in science, technology, and engineering—not basic scientific research in these areas, but only highly applied learning, learning that can quickly generate profit-making strategies. The humanities, the arts, and critical thinking were basically absent. By omitting them, the report strongly suggested that it would be perfectly all right if these abilities were allowed to wither away in favor of more useful disciplines.

In March 2004, a group of scholars from many nations gathered to discuss the educational philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore—winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 and a leading innovator in education. Tagore’s educational experiment, which had wide influence in Europe, Japan, and the United States, focused on the empowerment of the student through practices of Socratic argument, exposure to many world cultures, and above all, infusion of music, fine art, theater, and dance into every part of the curriculum. In India today, Tagore’s ideas are neglected, and even scorned. Participants in the conference all agreed that a new conception, focused on profit, has taken over, in the process sidelining the whole idea of imaginative and critical self-development through which Tagore had formed so many future citizens of India’s successful democracy. Would democracy in India survive today’s assault upon its soul? Faced with so much recent evidence of bureaucratic obtuseness and uncritical group-think, many participants feared that the answer might be “No.”

A new conception, focused on profit, has taken over.
In November 2005, a teachers retreat was held at the Laboratory School in Chicago—the school, on the campus of my own university, where John Dewey conducted his path-breaking experiments in democratic education reform, the school where President Barack Obama’s daughters spent their early formative years. The teachers had gathered to discuss the topic of education for democratic citizenship, and they considered a wide range of educational experiments, studying figures ranging from Socrates to Dewey in the Western tradition, to the closely related ideas of Tagore in India. But something was clearly amiss. The teachers—who take pride in stimulating children to question, criticize, and imagine—expressed anxiety about the pressures they face from wealthy parents who send their kids to this elite school. Impatient with allegedly superfluous skills, and intent on getting their children filled with testable skills that seem likely to produce financial success, these parents are trying to change the school’s guiding vision. They seem poised to succeed.

In fall 2005, the head of the search committee for a new dean of the School of Education at one of our nation’s most prestigious universities called me for advice. Hereafter I will refer to the university as X. X’s School of Education has enormous influence on teachers and schools all over the United States. As I began talking about the role of the humanities and arts in education for democratic citizenship, saying what I took

The faculties of thought and imagination make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships.

to be familiar and obvious, the woman expressed surprise. “How unusual,” she said, “no one else I’ve talked to has mentioned any of these things at all. We have been talking only about how X University can contribute to scientific and technical education around the world, and that’s the thing that our president is really interested in. But what you say is very interesting, and I really want to think about it.”

In the winter of 2006, another prestigious US university—let’s call it Y—held a symposium celebrating a major anniversary, a centerpiece of which was to have been discussion of the future of liberal education. A few months before the event, speakers who had agreed to be part of this were told that the focus had been changed and that they should just come and lecture to small departmental audiences on any topic they liked. A helpful and nicely talkative junior administrator told me that the reason for the change was that the president of Y had decided that a symposium on liberal education would not “make a splash,” so he decided to replace it with one on the latest achievements in technology and their role in generating profits for business and industry.
Given that economic growth is so eagerly sought by all nations, especially at this time of crisis, too few questions have been posed about the direction of education, and, with it, of the world’s democratic societies. With the rush to profitability in the global market, values precious for the future of democracy, especially in an era of religious and economic anxiety, are in danger of getting lost.

The profit motive suggests to many concerned leaders that science and technology are of crucial importance for the future health of their nations. We should have no objection to good scientific and technical education, and I shall not suggest that nations should stop trying to improve in this regard. My concern is that other abilities, equally crucial, are at risk of getting lost in the competitive flurry, abilities crucial to the health of any democracy internally, and to the creation of a decent world culture capable of constructively addressing the world’s most pressing problems.

These abilities are associated with the humanities and the arts: the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a “citizen of the world”; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person.

I shall make my argument by pursuing the contrast that my examples have already suggested: between an education for profit making and an education for a more inclusive type of citizenship. I shall try to show how the humanities and arts are crucial both in primary/secondary and in university education, drawing examples from a range of different stages and levels. I do not at all deny that science and social science, particularly economics, are also crucial to the education of citizens. But nobody is suggesting leaving these studies behind. I focus, then, on what is both precious and profoundly endangered.

When practiced at their best, moreover, these disciplines are infused by what we might meet in society, if we have not learned to see both self and other in that way, imagining in one another inner faculties of thought and emotion, democracy is bound to fail; because democracy is built upon respect and concern, and these in turn are built upon the ability to see other people as human beings, not simply as objects.
call the spirit of the humanities: by searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in. Science education in recent years has rightly focused on educating the capacities for critical thinking, logical analysis, and imagining. Science, rightly pursued, is a friend of the humanities rather than their enemy. Although good science education is not my theme, a companion study on that topic would be a valuable complement to my focus on the humanities.

The trends I deplore are worldwide, but I focus throughout on two very different nations that I know well: the United States, where I live and teach, and India, where my own global development work, much of it focused on education, has been conducted. India has a glorious tradition of humanities and arts education, exemplified in the theory and practice of the great Tagore. And his valuable ideas laid the foundations for a democratic nation and greatly influenced democratic education in Europe and the United States. But I also talk about the role of education in rural literacy projects for women and girls today, where the impetus to empower through the arts remains vital, and the effect of this empowerment on democracy can be clearly seen.

Where the United States is concerned, my arguments range over many types of educational experiments, from the use of Socratic self-examination in schools of many sorts to the role of arts organizations in plugging gaps in the public school curriculum. (The remarkable story of the Chicago Children’s Choir provides a detailed case study.)

But education does not take place only in schools. Most of the traits that are my focus need to be nurtured in the family as well, both in the early years and as children mature. Part of a comprehensive public policy approach to the questions this manifesto raises must include discussion of how families can be supported in the task of developing children's capabilities. The surrounding peer culture and the larger culture of social norms and political institutions also play an important role, either supporting or subverting the work done by schools and families. The focus on schools, colleges, and universities is justified, however, because it is in these institutions that the most pernicious changes have been taking place, as the pressure for economic growth leads to changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and funding. If we are aware that we are addressing just one part of the story of how citizens develop, we can pursue this focus without distortion.

Education is not just for citizenship. It prepares people for employment and, impor-
tantly, for meaningful lives. Another entire book could be written about the role of the arts and humanities in advancing these goals. All modern democracies, however, are societies in which the meaning and ultimate goals of human life are topics of reasonable disagreement among citizens who hold many different religious and secular views; and these citizens will naturally differ about how far various types of humanistic education serve their own particular goals. What we can agree about is that young people all over the world, in any nation lucky enough to be democratic, need to grow up to be participants in a form of government in which the people inform themselves about crucial issues they will address as voters and, sometimes, as elected or appointed officials. Every modern democracy is also a society in which people differ greatly along many parameters, including religion, ethnicity, wealth and class, physical impairment, gender, and sexuality, and in which all voters are making choices that have a major impact on the lives of people who differ from themselves. One way of assessing any educational scheme is to ask how well it prepares young people for life in a form of social and political organization that has these features. Without support from suitably educated citizens; no democracy can remain stable.

Cultivated capacities for critical thinking and reflection are crucial in keeping democracies alive and wide awake. The ability to think well about a wide range of cultures, groups, and nations in the context of a grasp of the global economy and of the history of many national and group interactions is crucial in order to enable democracies to deal responsibly with the problems we currently face as members of an interdependent world. And the ability to imagine the experience of another—a capacity almost all human beings possess in some form—needs to be greatly enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains.

The national interest of any modern democracy requires a strong economy and a flourishing business culture. This economic interest, too, requires us to draw on the humanities and arts, in order to promote a climate of responsible and watchful stewardship and a culture of creative innovation. Thus we are not forced to choose between a form of education that promotes profit and a form of education that promotes good citizenship. A flourishing economy requires the same skills that support citizenship.

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a strong economy is a means to human ends, not an end in itself. Most of us would not choose to live in a prosperous nation that had ceased to be democratic. Moreover, although it is clear that a strong business culture requires some people who are imaginative and critical, it is not clear that it requires all people in a nation to gain these skills. Democratic participation makes wider demands, and it is these wider demands that my argument supports.

No system of education is doing a good job if its benefits reach only wealthy elites. The distribution of access to quality education is an urgent issue in all modern democracies. It has long been a shameful feature of the United States, a wealthy nation, that access to quality primary/secondary education, and especially access to college/university education, is so unequally distributed. Many developing nations contain even larger disparities in access: India, for example, reports a male literacy rate of only around 65 percent, a female literacy rate of around 50 percent. Urban/rural disparities are larger. In secondary and higher education, there are even more striking gaps—between male and female, between rich and poor, between urban and rural. The lives of children who grow up knowing that they will go on to university and even postgraduate education are utterly different from the lives of children who in many cases do not get a chance to attend school at all. This is about what we should be striving for. Until we are clear about this, it is difficult to figure out how to get it to those who need it.

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The lines are being drawn for an epic battle over the future of higher education, especially public higher education, even as the aims and intentions of the combatants remain murky to most Americans. At the leadership level, supporters and critics of higher education see starkly different problems besetting the system and use radically different frameworks to describe their goals. Typical citizens, including most college students and their families, bring their own set of distinctive concerns to the subject. In key respects, what’s at issue in higher education depends largely on whom you’re talking to. Confronting and sorting out these colliding perspectives—and understanding the values that shape them—will be an essential step in resolving the argument.

Among college presidents, faculty, alumnae, and others, the prevailing fear is that the quality and preeminence of the nation’s higher education system is at risk. Most see the country’s network of public and private colleges, community colleges, and universities as a great national achievement, a lynchpin of the country’s social, economic, and political progress. Yet according to this view, this irreplaceable asset is in jeopardy.

Taxpayer support for public higher education has fallen, dropping nearly 8 percent in 2011-2012 alone, and many state systems have cut services and raised tuition. In 2008, more than 50 university presidents, representing both public and private institutions, wrote an open letter to the president calling for more federal funding to ease the shortfall, and according to a 2011 study from Public Agenda, most college trustees see their top challenge as maintaining institutional quality “in the face of rising costs and declining financial resources.” Noting that systems have already cut millions of dollars from
Another pointed to a pervasive lack of maturity among incoming students: “They’re not independent learners or thinkers or self-starters . . . [they] don’t really seem to be ready for the college atmosphere.” These concerns about quality are often intensified by the strong push from government, philanthropy, and business to produce more college graduates. For many inside higher education, the goal of dramatically upping graduation rates seems impossible unless K-12 schooling improves or academic standards in college are lowered.

Others paint a radically different picture of higher education. They often depict the system as bloated, out-of-date, hidebound, arrogant, and inward-looking. For many critics, traditional American colleges and universities resemble a stodgy industry that needs bold, outside-the-box thinking and a thorough shake-up. Brian Kelly, who edits the *U.S. News & World Report* annual college rankings, makes this explicit comparison: “If colleges were businesses, they would be ripe for hostile takeovers, complete with serious cost-cutting and painful reorganizations.” Another critic, interviewed for a Public Agenda study, described the current system as operating on a 19th-century agricultural calendar and a 20th-century industrial model while “trying to produce a high-quality product in a 21st-century global, technology-infused environment.” In this reformer’s view, higher education will not emerge from its current malaise unless the existing model is completely “disrupted.”

For these critics, college presidents and faculty who complain about inadequate resources and poor student preparation are merely making excuses; and many believe that the public is growing impatient with the situation too. The Heritage Foundation’s Stuart Butler, for example,
argues that many Americans see four-year college degrees as “vastly overpriced” and that some are beginning to wonder whether what students learn on campus is really worth the spiraling cost.

So the battle among leaders rages around this central question: Is now the moment to preserve and protect traditional higher education, or is it time to disrupt the model and topple it? Both sides could easily cite selected survey results suggesting that most Americans agree with them. But a scan of the research overall shows the public's current views do not fall squarely on either side of the argument. Majorities of Americans worry about rising costs and student debt, and many are suspicious of higher education’s claims of near poverty. At the same time, few seem to be calling for a revolution, especially one that would transform colleges and universities into more competitive, market-driven institutions—an approach recommended by many reformers. In focus groups conducted by Public Agenda and the Kettering Foundation, most typical citizens seemed unaware that such fundamental changes have even been broached.

Some prevailing themes in the public’s thinking about higher education do emerge from both surveys and qualitative opinion research. Americans increasingly regard graduating from college as a necessity in the workplace. In their view, unless college is affordable, access for the middle class will be cut off. There’s not much dispute about the facts: College tuition costs have been rising faster than inflation, and costs at public universities have jumped 47 percent over the past decade. Meanwhile, Public Agenda research has shown that the public’s belief that a person needs a degree to find a good job has jumped from 31 percent in 2000 to 55 percent in 2009. Or, to look at it from another angle, those who believe there are “many ways to succeed in today's world without a college education” has plummeted from 67 to 43 percent over the same time period. A 2011 Gallup poll found that nearly 7 in 10 Americans believe that “having a college degree is essential for getting a good job in this country.” Given that, it is hardly surprising that most Americans are concerned about college costs. The vast majority say students have to borrow too much money to go to college, and a 2011 Pew survey found that only one in five Americans believe “most people can afford to pay for a college education.”

Such concerns are breeding cynicism about higher education’s motives. The public’s fears about whether college is affordable seem to be stoking doubts about whether colleges and universities are really doing all they can to control costs. According to Public Agenda research, more than half of Americans say “colleges could spend less and still maintain a high quality of

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education,” and similar numbers say higher education institutions could take in “a lot more students without lowering quality or raising prices.” Even more ominous, however, is the growing number of Americans who question higher education’s commitment to the well-being of its students. In Public Agenda’s 2010 SqueezePlay survey, 6 in 10 Americans said that “colleges today are like most businesses and care mainly about the bottom line.” Just 32 percent believed that “colleges today care mainly about education and making sure that students have a good educational experience.”

Despite this concern, however, there’s little evidence that most people want a complete transformation in how colleges and universities operate. The fault lines in the public’s trust in higher education should be worrisome to college leaders, if only because, in one especially potent warning sign, nearly half of Americans say their state’s higher education system should be “fundamentally overhauled.” On the surface at least, that is a finding that appears to reinforce the position of reformers. But the public’s interest in a sweeping overhaul may not be as far-reaching as it initially appears. For example, surveys show that most Americans reject proposals to reduce course requirements and allow students to graduate more quickly. Most oppose consolidating programs and “closing some branches of state colleges.” And most also seem hesitant fully to endorse another favored reform and cost-cutting strategy—more online learning.

The Heritage Foundation’s Stuart Butler believes the need for transformational change in higher education is manifest. He points out that “upstart institutions” are “perfecting radically new education technologies and business plans,” and he predicts that “quite soon, such new institutions will do to higher education what Sony did to radios and Apple did to computing.” For Butler, online learning will be a centerpiece:

> Online learning changes the entire relationship between student and teacher; it enables information to be transferred, and student performance to be monitored, at a fraction of conventional costs. . . . Online education has the potential to completely upend today’s established universities.

The public’s views, however, seem far less expansive and hopeful. There’s not a lot of good research on how the public thinks about cutting-edge ideas like that of a significant shift from classroom to online coursework. Relatively few people have much personal experience with online courses—especially the ground-breaking innovations Butler envisions. And there’s not much evidence that most people are especially optimistic about the prospect. In a 2007 Public Agenda survey, nearly three-quarters of the respondents said most college students would be better served by traditional classroom courses rather than courses...
indispensable job requirement may not be justified—and that it may not be fair. Two-thirds of Americans say a lot of employers hire college graduates for "jobs that could be done just as well or better by people without a college degree."

There are also widespread misgivings among some key groups about whether encouraging all high school graduates to go to college is always beneficial. Public Agenda surveys of public school teachers show that only 4 in 10 strongly agree that "all my students, given the right support, can go to college if they choose." Focus groups with college professors show deep-seated concerns that too many of their students aren't really committed to academic work—they're basically going through the motions to get the degree. Even college students themselves appear divided on the topic. Most young adults say their parents, teachers, and mentors encouraged them to attend college, and although most agree that people with degrees

Some people wonder whether “going to college” has become too important.
make more money they, like their teachers and professors, are not all convinced that college is for everyone. A 2009 Public Agenda survey shows that a solid 50 percent of young people who start college strongly agree that it “is not for everyone—some people just don’t like school.”

In the past few years, increasing college graduation rates appears to have become a national movement led by foundations, business groups, and elected officials; research among trustees suggests that this is a virtually universal institutional goal. Critics pushing for “break-the-mold” reforms often point out that one of their key motivations is to make going to college more widespread and affordable. But the general public appears to be somewhat less convinced of the wisdom of this goal.

Compared to countries like Germany, Denmark, and Austria, the United States does not have a robust or well-respected system of apprenticeships and certificate programs for students who are less academically inclined; and most Americans have not had the opportunity to deliberate about the advantages and trade-offs of moving to a more “European” model. There are certainly questions about fairness and equal opportunity that need to be weighed, yet the public-at-large does now seem more inclined to talk about whether going to college should be the default option for all high school graduates. The question for many people is whether some high school graduates (and society as a whole) might be better off if they had a broader array of meaningful non-college options available to them, although the public’s starting point on higher education is less assured than that of most American leaders.

Relatively few people have thought deeply about how higher education operates today, much less about whether a vastly different system that emphasizes productivity, innovation, and competition would be better. As of now, most people seem not predisposed to enshrine higher education in its current form, yet they do not seem ready to jettison or “disrupt” the current system entirely.

What is clear is that most Americans see college as the key to some modicum of economic security, and they fear that rising costs will weaken their tenuous hold on the prospect of a life in the middle class. Most are still open-minded about the best path out of this dilemma. Most are still willing to listen and consider many ideas. Leaders, in contrast, appear to be hunkering down for a long and angry policy debate, with each side offering a starkly different diagnosis of the problem and radically different solutions. In its current form, the discussion among leadership is a near recipe for gridlock and lack of resolution.
The danger is that this crosstalk over the future of higher education comes at a particularly precarious moment for the country. The US workforce is no longer the best educated in the world, and major business leaders predict shortages of college-educated workers, which will imperil the country’s economic future—and it’s not just in science and technology, a concern that has attracted wide attention in both government and the private sector. Employers are looking for college graduates with a better grasp of the world, knowledgeable people who understand different cultures and speak other languages. They want workers with the sophistication and breadth of vision that will help their organizations thrive in a diverse, unpredictable global milieu. Surveys of employers suggest that many also value the traditional virtues of a liberal education—majorities want colleges and universities to put more emphasis on teaching critical thinking, problem solving, and ethical decision making. More than half want more attention to civic knowledge and engagement as well.

Throughout our history, the United States has recognized the role of colleges and universities in helping the nation move forward, and we have joined together to support remarkable transformations in higher education that proved to be turning points. In the 19th century, the government gave federal land to states to build colleges, so that more Americans would have access to higher education. Establishing these institutions helped advance the country’s economic, political, and social progress. During the Great Depression, extension agents from land-grant colleges worked with rural communities on soil conservation, electrification, and rural education. These public works helped hundreds of communities lift themselves out of poverty. After World War II, the GI bill made it possible for returning soldiers to attend college. Not only did this empower individuals to build good lives for themselves and their families, but it also gave the United States the best-educated workforce in the world—one that helped propel the country’s astonishing post-war economic growth.

The question before us now is whether we can find a common vision that will sustain and remake “higher” education for the better, or whether our colliding perspectives will obstruct and paralyze us, leaving the entire country unprepared, and in various ways “undereducated,” for the future.

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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.
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 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.

People have been bereft of a sense of possibility.

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.

People have been bereft of a sense of possibility.
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 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,

**People can rediscover their own innate power.**

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 counter-force 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.

Before 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, unchecked and unexamined, 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:

- 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?
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.

What 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. 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.

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.
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 the space for interactions 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.

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

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

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.
“Institutions can learn how to mesh with and reinforce the work of citizens.”

This Review has compelling accounts of some of the problems in our political system: loss of confidence in institutions, incivility and gridlock in politics, disillusionment with big reforms and one-size-fits-all solutions. Such problems certainly include people’s frustration with not being able to make a significant difference in the system, with not having a strong hand in shaping their future—a frustration intensified by the impact political problems are having on the economy and by the apparent inability of the political system to reform itself.

Problems like these provide a context for the Kettering Foundation’s annual overview of its research, which this year has been focused on higher education’s role in our democracy. Our research is rooted in the history of higher learning in America that shows how colleges and universities have been shaped by pressures from problems in our political system. The force of the American Revolution turned some colonial colleges into “seminars of sedition,” as students became caught up in the fervor of independence. Aided by sympathetic college presidents, collegians overran academic debates on scholarly topics with impassioned deliberations on timely political issues, like whether a standing army was appropriate in a new nation bent on writing its own chapter in human history. The influence of external pressure was evident again when the need for leaders with democratic values led to the creation of state universities modeled on Jefferson’s University of Virginia. And the same thing happened when farmers and mechanics wanted institutions that would provide relevant knowledge on subjects like agronomy and engineering. The result: land-grant universities. And later, this pattern was repeated when Native
Americans and African Americans, wanting to strengthen their communities, led to the establishing of colleges to help them. And later still, community colleges evolved out of “junior” colleges to respond to the growing number of Americans who wanted access to higher education and to communities seeking institutions that would be attentive to their concerns.

Higher education has been an essential part of the great causes in our nation’s history. So the question now, given the growing list of concerns about our political system, is how higher education will respond.

Aware of the importance of this question, the American Commonwealth Partnership is mounting a nationwide reexamination of the mission of our colleges and universities. The Partnership is using a National Issues Forums (NIF) guide to promote deliberations that will explore people’s reactions to different missions for academic institutions. The question of missions will require people to make difficult trade-offs because things they hold dear as citizens will be at stake. One thing people have considered valuable, for instance, is access to a college degree. Ever higher tuition has limited access; yet if costs are lowered, the quality of education students receive could be adversely affected. Institutions also face conflicting pressures to provide practical degrees that will lead to employment, while, at the same time, producing broadly educated graduates of good character who have a strong sense of social responsibility. Deciding among these missions will force people to recognize and deal with these sorts of tensions.

I suspect that some of these deliberations may get at the question of mission by starting with what kind of America people want, then looking at the role higher education should play—not the other way around. They have to be more off campus than on in order to engage the citizenry. And the potential in this undertaking goes well beyond the issue of mission. Colleges and universities could use public deliberations to address other town-gown issues: if that were to happen, it would be a new way for academic institutions to relate to “the public and its problems” (borrowing John Dewey’s phrase).

I am optimistic about what the Commonwealth Partnership can accomplish because higher education has already reached out to the citizenry in so many initiatives that it has spawned a civic-engagement movement on campuses. At the Kettering Foundation, our research has benefited from the growth of centers and institutes that are intent on putting the public back into the public’s business. Promoting democratic practices like public deliberation, they work on building civic capacity within communities.

There are many other examples of initiatives in higher education becoming more relevant off campus, some even in research. There are faculty members engaged in a more public form of scholarship that promises to connect traditional ways of producing expert knowledge with the socially constructed practical wisdom that citizens use to inform their judgment. And changes in academic curricula are envisioned by efforts to recapture the civic dimension of most all disciplines and professional fields. This initiative, led by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, grew out of an earlier (and ongoing) effort to remind us that the liberal arts were once civic arts. There is also great promise in the institutions that are pushing beyond community service and “service learning” to embed students in communities so they may learn the most essential civic art of all.
When a hurricane devastates, it is often the case that no outside assistance can reach a community quickly because roads have washed away and power lines are down. People live or die depending on their ability to come together to aid one another. Fortunately, some degree of self-organizing usually goes on; people instinctively rally. But this self-help can be seriously derailed by disagreements, particularly disagreements about what is the right thing to do. The key to surviving a disaster, human-made or natural, is the civic resilience of a community, a capacity that has to be there before a crisis occurs. The quintessential question in a community struck by any kind of calamity is whether people can come together—despite their differences—to do what they must do to overcome their problems.

When disasters occur, colleges and universities can provide valuable technical assistance and armies of volunteers. Yet, while helpful, these responses don’t speak to the first question citizens ask, which is, “What can we do?” not, “What assistance can you bring?” I’ve described this mismatch as “ships passing in the night.” Campus engagement is not necessarily aligned with the work of building community resilience.

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extensive data on the characteristics of the social order, on weather conditions, and on the growth rate of the population. Yet when he did his fieldwork, he realized that the data he was using didn’t capture the complexities of the conditions in rural communities. Most disconcerting of all, he saw that his way of producing knowledge wasn’t like the way villagers created knowledge. Sanz de Santamaria’s discomfort led him to change both the way he did research and the way he taught research in the classroom. He abandoned the assumption that the villages were “sick” and his job was to heal them. And he set out to find ways to communicate what he knew that would be consistent with the way people learned. His story, by the way, first appeared in this Review in the winter of 1993.

My hope is that colleges and universities will remember that they are more than what they do in teaching, research, and service. And they should be more than models of cost efficiency and good management. They are embodiments of the great causes they have served, and the democratic values implicit in those causes. They have souls, not just buildings and Internet connections. At its best, American higher education has, itself, been a movement.

David Mathews is president of the Kettering Foundation.
Citizens, Deliberation, and the Practice of Democracy: A Triptych from the Kettering Review

Citizens, Deliberation, and the Practice of Democracy brings together writing by 19 leading thinkers on the contemporary challenges of democracy. These provocative essays, first published in three issues of the Kettering Review to celebrate 25 years of the National Issues Forums, challenge readers to rethink conventional notions of democracy, public deliberation, and citizenship.

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