

Originating Civic Faith and Self-Trust in America

By Richard C. Harwood

Where do we stand today in this nation of ours? What is our civic faith? Who among us will answer the call? These are the questions I believe we must answer if we are to move our country forward and pursue our common dreams and aspirations.

Over the last five weeks I have heard the presidential candidates announce their candidacies and speak out more. George W. Bush announced to rave reviews in Iowa, Texas and across the country.

He talked about the sense of optimism this country needs and a belief in community and in each other. Just days later, Vice President Al Gore in Carthage, Tennessee, seeming to read from a similar hymn book, said that we need faith in ourselves, we need hope, we need to return to

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community. I hear Mr. Alexander from Tennessee talk about these same ideals and Mr. Forbes, and Elizabeth Dole and Bill Bradley and others.

As I listen to them I shake my head in wonderment, and stand here today deeply troubled. What is going to happen as this political race starts to tighten up? Where will these candidates stand when the going gets tough? What will be their beliefs when all of a sudden their handlers start to tell them, “You can no longer talk about hope and faith and community in this country; it is time to engage in the politics of personal destruction?” Will these candidates, who once said, “Here I am to offer you hope and a different pathway for this country,” still answer that call?

The reason why I am troubled by this is because we have a nation yearning for hope — for something different, for something better. Indeed, our latest study, called HOPE, makes a distinction between what so many of us seem to experience these days, which is a kind of

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false hope in our politics and public life, and what so many of us seem to be looking for, which is a sense of genuine hope, or what I call “authentic hope” — a sense of possibility that we can move this country forward and for all of us to be better tomorrow than we are today.

I am troubled because I am so struck by the game of politics, and how it is at such great odds with what I hear when I go across this country and listen to Americans. Whether it is in South Carolina or Michigan or California, or wherever it may be, I am struck by how much people think there is something amiss in this country. We feel this despite the fact that all our economic indicators tell us that we should be happy, not to worry. The largest peacetime expansion in the history of America. More people at work than ever before. The Dow Jones breaking through the ceiling. Deficits coming down.

I hear people from all walks of American life talk about how isolated they feel in their own communities; people in towns of 1500 and in cities with millions. I hear people say that too often we have allowed materialism to push out, crowd out, our values of community and family and faith and responsibility. That there are too many homeless people still on the street; that too many schools are not serving our children. Just yesterday on the radio, I heard a gentlemen tell a New York Times reporter, “You keep telling me in your daily coverage about how well Wall Street is doing, as if that really affects most Americans; why not give as much coverage, if not more, to an index on the living wage in this country and how well Americans are doing day after day?” I hear people wonder about how the richest nation in the world can permit such disparities to exist in healthcare among Americans.

When I go across this country, I often ask people, “What is it that you see when you look outside your window about politics and public life?” The common refrain is this: I see a politics where we point fingers at

each other. Where we blame each other for past failures. Where we question each other's personal and professional motivations about who we are as individuals, when we might hold a simple disagreement on an issue or idea. I see a politics where we try to attract people by going negative, by striking fears in their hearts and minds, and where silly and irrelevant discussions occur about pressing issues that I care about deeply.

The Harwood Institute is working now in Flint, Michigan to help that community come back. I remember not too long ago, I was sitting around with about ten people, and I turned to a woman from Flint and asked her, "When you look outside of your apartment window, what do you see?" She turned back to me and said, "I see hell." She then continued, "I see a place where I don't want my children to walk because I'm afraid that when they come home from

school some drug dealer is going to push drugs on them. When I come home at night, in the dark, I am afraid to walk from my car to my apartment. I live in a neighborhood and in a city where I am afraid to walk down the street and look someone in the eye and say hello."

She looked outside her window and she saw hell. I do not think that is true for most Americans, but I do think we see many things in politics and public life we do not like.

I do not know about you, but I am tired of watching the presidential candidates, and others, parade before us and tell us that we should have hope one minute, and then destroy that hope the very next minute — through their game of politics, and through our own antics. I am tired of the fact that we cannot seem to get together and solve some of the pressing problems we have in this country because we want to jockey around for position, for turf, for funding,

I think we need a civic faith for this time so that we can regain our footing, have hope about the future, and move this country forward.

for credit. It is tiring as we continue to engage in a kind of empty, superficial, vacuous politics. It is troubling when we ourselves can be better — that we have that potential within us.

A LOSS OF SELF-TRUST

Throughout American history, this nation has experienced major national transitions. In the 1830s, during the Young America movement, people believed that we had lost the spirit of revolution, that we were becoming complacent, that the nation was becoming overly commercialized. So people stepped forward and said that we needed to regain our spirit that founded this country. In the 1860s, President Lincoln and others led a nation that was divided, where one American fought against another, and sought to make the nation whole. In the 1930s, there was a national transition in which we pursued big government and a New Deal to help us out of a depression.

I think in the 1990s, as we enter the next century, our current transition is about a loss of self-trust. Emerson talked about self-trust, calling it the “genius of America,” saying that we hold knowledge and wisdom within ourselves. That we can find answers to our challenges within ourselves if we trust our instincts and trust ourselves to follow those instincts.

Self-trust — that is what I believe the national transition of the late 1990s and the next century is about. And to restore our self-trust, one of the things we need to do is to originate a civic faith for these times.

How do we originate a civic faith? I am talking first and foremost about a civic faith that has a long and rich tradition in this country. For me, it was most poignantly articulated at the time of Abraham Lincoln, when he tried to pull the country together, and includes the likes of Emerson and Walt Whitman, Eleanor Roosevelt, on to Bobby Kennedy, to Ralph Ellison.

Ralph Ellison, an African-American, a favorite author of

mine, was a truly remarkable man and American. He experienced prejudice, deep prejudice, growing up in Oklahoma and living in other places in our country. Yet, if you read his writings, there is one common, recurring theme: that there is something called an “American identity” that transcends our differences. That within each person in this country, there is an innate goodness. That is what Eleanor Roosevelt listened for and talked about. It is what Abraham Lincoln tried to do in the 1860s. I think we need a civic faith for this time so that we can regain our footing, have hope about the future, and move this country forward.

Still, I hear people continually say, “We can’t make a difference.” That they work so hard at change, but that little which is worthwhile results from their daily efforts. But throughout our history, small bands of people is where change originated; we must always remind ourselves of that. In the American Revolution, you know, there was no office. They did not have stationery. There were

not 16 telephone lines that someone answered, “The American Revolution Office, can I help you?” No, people walked down the farm road and called the Minutemen off their farms, off their fields to go off to fight the war. In the Civil Rights Movement, the folks who sat at a store counter banded together and decided it was time to do something, to spark something real.

Our history is replete with what I call “civic brigades” of people coming together, in small groups, who spark change and move the country forward. Not long ago, we released a report called “Planned Serendipity” that looks at eight communities and their collaborations. The keys to their success were not how much money they had, although that helped; were not how many people they had sitting around the table, but eventually more people were needed; were not how many programs they had or the color of their stationery or how well their newsletter read every month. It was the fact that a handful of people sat at someone’s kitchen table, like-minded folks, who had a

vision based on a currency of an idea from within the community (and not from a poll or focus group.) The time was right for people in these moments to band together and make something happen. That is the kind of civic faith we need.

As I travel the country I hear another common refrain: that the only way to move people is to strike at their own self-interests ... their pocketbook, their economic interest, their immediate family members. How many times have any of you gone to a school board meeting, and as you sit there, one person after another stands up and says, "What about my kid?" Right? "What are you going to do about my kid? That's a nice budget proposal, but what are you going to do for my kid?" Over and over it goes. The squeaky wheel gets the oil.

Yet when I talk to Americans for extended periods of time, what clearly emerges is that we Americans

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want to be part of something larger than just ourselves and our immediate surroundings. That we are tired of complaining and expressing our demands and making claims on government institutions and programs. We want to take more responsibility for ourselves; and not only that, we have real aspirations, not just demands, about the kind of country we want to become and be.

I am suggesting that our civic faith ought to be based on the all-too-often hidden reality that people can transcend self-interest and find common interest in this country. I believe it is possible. I still believe it is possible.

What is more, throughout the history of this country, and in these times today, there remains an innate goodness in the people. It is part of our heritage. Of course, we will never do away with evil, but what I have seen across these United States is that we can

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temper our worst instincts by tapping into our innate goodness and by calling it forth. We can do it.

IT IS POSSIBLE

There are many people, when I make this argument about civic faith, who chuckle. "You know Rich," they say, "this is 'really nice'." Then they often continue by saying, "But I don't have time for all that; it simply is not the way the real world works. It is not possible in a country of some 260 million people — a country that has so many divisions and identities; it is just not possible."

As I sit there and listen to them, I often wonder, and then get more troubled, about the messages we often push on each other in this country of ours. But then I remember what I have seen in our country; that civic faith and self-trust is possible. Here are just a few examples from our own work at The Harwood Institute of what can happen when we begin to tap people's civic faith and self-trust, and generate a sense of possibility

and hope again.

We have created a political barometer that we call The Harwood Barometer for Political Conduct — it has eleven factors, but the essence of it is quite simple. In our nation, we spend too much time complaining about politics, and we ought to spend a heck of a lot more time on what our aspirations are for politics. We all know what is wrong, let us now talk about what we want and let us begin to move in that direction starting today.

When we created this Barometer, people told us it would not work. “Too nice” again, was the refrain; it is not real politics. Except that when we went to Fresno, California and Louisville, Kentucky in the 1998 election, a governor’s race and congressional race, respectively; in five short weeks, here is what happened. We formed a coalition of people, the likes of which we do not usually see anymore, to distribute Barometers. People

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who had never heard of us — the local Urban League, Junior League, Archdiocese of Louisville, Winn Dixie Supermarkets, the Barnes & Noble bookstore, a whole host of groups, numbering well over fifty, looked at this Barometer and said that it speaks to what they believe is important in their community and in this country. They declared, “I want to be a part of this!” They saw hope in this little piece of paper we call the Barometer. Imagine that? Before we knew it the transit authority was distributing it on their buses. Can you imagine that — getting on a city bus and seeing a Barometer? In five short weeks time we distributed 250,000 Harwood Barometers. We had budgeted enough for about 15,000 or 20,000 and we were scrimping and scraping to find money to keep printing them — 250,000!

Listen to this: In one small Saturday morning show I did on C-SPAN, when I had to

send a Western Union Telegraph man to my parent's house in upstate New York to wake them up to watch it, we had over 1,000 calls to our 800 number from people across the country, and we're still getting calls — because people find hope in the Barometer. They can see possibility in it and they can see themselves in it. There is an old country song the refrain of which is, "I can't see me in your eyes anymore." I think what people are saying when they see this Barometer is that it speaks to them, that they can see themselves, and that they can hear their aspirations for politics and public life in it.

In Flint, Michigan, where we are helping the community rejuvenate itself, one of the small things we are doing is called The Place for Public Ideas — where civic organizations, non-profits and leaders in the community can come together to think hard about the kinds of public sensibilities and practices that will create hope in Flint and marshal its resources. When we proposed this idea to the Mott Foundation they hesitated at first because of conditions in

the community, which suggested that no one would come to The Place, that it would not work. I do not blame them.

They eventually funded it, a courageous move on their part, and then people in the community started to tell us that The Place would not work — that no one in their community would step forward and answer the call. We put out a little piece of paper that said, "If you want to attend, please apply." And you know what happened? We got 25 people for the first class — just like that, 25 people. And then people in the community said again, "You're not going to get any more — you got 25 folks, the cream of the crop, there are not any more people left in this town who want to be leaders, who want to make something happen." So we put out the little piece of paper again, and we invited a second class. You know what happened this time? Two weeks ago, we graduated our first group and we inaugurated the second. Standing right before me were about 40 people who had come forward because they wanted to join

the civic brigade within the community of Flint and help that town push forward and do politics and public life differently. They want to be a community that is becoming — a hallmark of America’s civic faith.

In community after community, this is what we keep finding, that so many Americans, so many of us, see schools as somewhere “over there,” apart from the community.

But that’s not the end of the story. We already have a third class identified and there is going to be a waiting list for it. Why? I can tell you what people told me who were sitting in that room a couple of weeks ago: they said that a new sense of hope is emerging out of this work, and that it is slowly seeping out to others in the community. They told me that when people came together they came to realize that they share common hopes and aspirations for their community; and, that even when they disagree, they can stay at the table and keep moving forward. It worked for them because three groups that had never come together before gave birth to a new idea and formed a new collaboration on an old issue

nagging the community. Why it is working? Because people see possibility; they feel a sense of hope. Now we need to echo such stories across the country: that civic faith and self-trust is possible.

One last example, this one from South Carolina, where we are piloting an initiative in four school districts across the state to reconnect communities and schools.

Today, it can seem that we treat our schools like gas stations — we dress up our kids in the morning; send them off to school; they come home at three o’clock or maybe five-thirty if they are in an after-school program, and we pray that they have learned to be good citizens, do arithmetic, write their name and read. In community after community, this is what we keep finding, that so many Americans, so many of us, see schools as somewhere “over there,” apart from the community. And,

school officials, often view themselves as being separate from the community.

How is it then that we can bring schools to be a part of the community, not apart from them. For we cannot educate our children without the whole community. But people keep saying to me, "You can't reconnect communities and schools — it is not going to happen in this day and age; people are just too fragmented, and they are taking care of their own business." Again, the notion of self-interest and self-absorption rears its head.

Well, in Horry County, in just the handful of months they have been doing this work, some early results are in. Horry County is bigger than the land mass of the entire state of Rhode Island. Already, they have changed budget priorities. It is possible. Already, the school board chair has said, "Our school board meetings don't work. Who in their right mind

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would want to come to a school board meeting given the way that they're run?" She says that while they can change school board meetings only so much, they can go out into the community and engage people in talking about schools and their communities. They are about to. It is possible. Already people have come forward and they are taking this work, that they have been doing on a county wide basis, and are bringing it back to their individual schools. It is possible.

Indeed, someone from South Carolina called our office not too long ago and said that they want to take these materials and apply them to different issues in their community. The results: They are taking insights about how to do public business differently around communities and schools and are now demonstrating that we can originate civic faith and self-trust throughout public life. People keep saying that it is

not possible, but it is already being shown that it is possible to originate civic faith and self-trust when people get together and decide to do something. When people start to believe that they can generate hope among themselves. When people believe they can come together and agree on some things and that they can move forward on them. It is possible — even against the odds.

TAKE A STAND

Where is it that we stand in our nation today? What is our civic faith? And who among us will answer the call? Here are three challenges to think about.

First, stand up and stand tall. I did not get this little saying from a focus group or book. It is something that I believe we must do in order to move our nation forward; it is a reality that I have found present in every tale of change — that someone, somewhere decided to stand up and lead. Indeed, Eleanor Roosevelt, in her syndicated newspaper column *My Day*, said, “It is not fair to ask others to do what

we are not willing to do ourselves.” In every community, some small group, a civic brigade of folks, stands up and says, “We can be different; it doesn’t have to be this way. We can be better tomorrow than we are today.”

Second, tap the genius of America. Again, Emerson told us, rightly I believe, that self-trust is the genius of this country — that it is a font of wisdom and knowledge within us that we must tap in order to find our way. In a country that has become so professionalized, where we often seem to have to take a poll to know our own convictions, there remains wisdom within our communities and throughout this nation. We must tap into the genius of this country — not to replace professional expertise, but to gain our full measure of our wisdom and hope.

Third, create a legacy. How many times has a program worked and then government dollars, or some other source of funding, dried up and the benefits of the program quickly disappeared. How many times have we latched onto a program that is

just another fad of the week,
the flavor of the month?

What was left in
our community
after such
efforts?

We need
to think much
more, much
harder, and
with a far greater
sense of purpose,
about how we make our
efforts part of the community,
not separate and apart from it.
How do we find leaders who
will take on initiatives, make
them part of their lives, and
contribute beyond the couple
of hours required to show up
at a meeting just to be seen?
How do we find the people for
a sustainable, lasting civic
brigade? How do we create
institutions that are embedded
with the norms and the values
to carry our work forward?

I would like to end with
these lines from a poem by
Maya Angelou. I come back
to these words repeatedly in
my travels, because each time
I read them they are ever-more
relevant; they stir me; and I
believe that they speak to
where we stand today.

**How do we
create institutions
that are embedded
with the norms and
the values to
carry our work
forward?**

*Today the Rock cries out to us,
Clearly, forcefully*

*Come, you may stand
upon my back*

*And face your
distant destiny*

*But seek no
haven in my
shadow*

*I will give you no
hiding place down
here...*

*The Rock cries out to us today,
you stand on me,*

But do not hide your face.

Where do we stand today
in this nation of ours? What is
our civic faith? Who among
us will answer the call? Let us
go forward from this day and
stand upon the rock and face
our common destiny. Let us
believe in ourselves again and
generate new hope.

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