

# Moving From A Flat World To A Round World In Public Life

By Richard C. Harwood

When preparing to give a talk, we often think that you are supposed to come up with two or three bullets so that everyone can jot them down on a piece of paper, take them home, and act on them tomorrow. Now, I know many of you may be hoping that is what I am going to do; but I am not. Instead, I would like to ask you to go with me on a journey about America, its public life, and the connection between schools and communities. And to think deeply with me about that.

About a week or so ago, I was in my daughter's classroom. She is a second grader, a seven-year-old. It was time for open house and parent-teacher conferences. Do you remember how second grade classrooms have those really small chairs? As I was sitting there all scrunched up, I was thinking about my daughter and what her teacher was telling me about her. But as I looked around her classroom, I also found myself thinking about today. I was wondering, why is it so hard in our society to connect schools and communities? After all, we have so many programs, projects, and initiatives — many great things, many of the things you are doing

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in your daily lives. Yet it remains so difficult to connect schools and communities.

The importance of this connection, I think, is clear. When I go across the country and spend hours talking with Americans face to face, I hear a remarkably similar message about schools and the role they play in our lives. Not just in educating our children, but about something much deeper, much more profound, much more important. Schools are a reflection of who we are. They are a reflection of what we, as a community, value. This holds true in large cities and small towns. Indeed, people speak eloquently, and with great emotion, about the need for our communities to connect their past, their present, and their future to one another, and that schools are, or at least at times have been, the embodiment of our heritage and aspirations. I also hear people within schools say, as I have from many superintendents, teachers, and administrators here in South Carolina, that communities themselves are the seedbeds of education. That there are some things only communities can do; that we cannot leave, for instance, our children at the schoolhouse door, even though we often try. Schools can not go it alone in raising and preparing our children.

So, why is it so hard to connect schools and communities? I could talk about different programs and initiatives that have been undertaken in different communities, but you know about those. What I would like to do is to talk about the context of American

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life and what is preventing us, within that larger context, from connecting schools and communities; because I think that the dilemma we face in making this connection is a reflection of the very dilemma we confront in our public lives every day.

## AMERICA'S WAITING PLACE

**T**his dilemma reminds me of a book I often read to my kids, *Oh, The Places You'll Go*, by Dr. Seuss. It is a great book. In it, when you get near the middle, after Dr. Seuss has taken you a roller-coaster ride of life's ups and downs, he writes about the "waiting place." Where people wait for a bus to come, a train to go, a plane to fly by; where they wait for another chance, and hope for something good to happen. The waiting place.

I think that is where our county is right now. We are kind of stuck. We are working our way through a national transition of sorts — where our public dilemmas, values, norms, and relationships are changing, and increasingly seem up for grabs. If you think about it, it is much like other times in our history. Our current condition is nothing new; it is like the 1890s, the 1860s, when Abraham Lincoln was our president, the 1930s.

We face today fundamental dilemmas about choices and values in our lives. For instance, while so many Americans seem to be running harder and harder to keep pace with a changing economy — of dealing with the effects of rapid changes in technology, skills, and a global setting — we are questioning what the American Dream means and for whom. We struggle with how to balance the urgencies of our economic life with the frailties of our family life. What is more, we ask: How do we live in a nation of increased mobility, seeking to care for a parent a thousand miles away, while watching our children at home? How do we make choices about what welfare should be, how we want to deal with immigration, or what to do about our schools? As our lives and the context within which we live undergo vast changes, competing choices are in play and values must be declared.

We are also wrestling with the social compacts that drive our relationships with one another and with institutions. What are our own responsibilities and what are our obligations to others? When people talk about education and community, there is a common refrain: Many of us, as parents, place more and more demands on the schools to help raise our children, as we work harder and harder, or simply neglect our own responsibilities. In either case, is that the right compact? That our schools increasingly should help to raise our children? Or, think about this situation: The most reliable babysitter in America today may not

be the parent. It may not be the older sister or brother. It may not be the grandmother or grandfather down the street. It may not be the neighbor across the way. It is, lo and behold, one of the three television sets in our home. That is the most reliable babysitter? What does that say about us? What responsibilities do we hold? Where are our neighbors and the rest of the community — can each of us go it alone? Many Americans tell The Harwood Group they are struggling with such tensions. I suspect that each of us here, in our own ways, struggle with some of these challenges.

We confront equally troubling dilemmas when it comes to people's trust in the institutions that affect our lives — like schools. My firm finished a report not too long ago entitled, "Halfway Out the Door." It was a national study about how citizens in America feel about schools. We gave it the title, "Halfway Out the Door," because people in the country told us they hold deep aspirations to send their children to public schools, but they feel their public schools are failing them. Not just in terms of reading and writing, but, as all you know better than I do, as safe learning places. They are concerned about whether we are creating the conditions for our children to learn. Whether teachers, who have a

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noble profession, have enough time to spend with our children, or if they will drown in a tidal wave of forms they must fill out. People are torn about what to do. They keep saying, "I want to have a relationship with this institution that helps to bind us together. But I'm 'halfway out the door.' I'm out of here; I don't want to be, but if I can find the money to do it, I will be. For this issue deals with my child, the most precious thing I have in my life." Schools, of course, are not the only institutions suffering from a lack of credibility and trust in our society today.

So, how do we get out of this "waiting place" — a place where we are often confused, where we are trying to sort out our competing values, to figure out the relationships among us and our neighbors, and with the institutions that affect our lives? I believe we cannot get out of the waiting place, indeed we will not be able to connect schools and communities, given the way we practice politics and public life in this country.

Think about these conditions in America today. Do not think about my words; think about the meaning of these conditions in your own daily lives — as you sit in your kitchen or living room, as you talk with a neighbor or friend, or as you think about the challenges your community and this nation face.

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We are involved in near non-stop debates in our land that are superficial, and stuck more on jargon and technical words, than about the essence of what we must address in order to make progress.

We have become so sophisticated with, so enamored by, technology, gizmos, teleconferences, graphics and design, that we have forgotten what it truly takes to inform someone on an issue. We have gotten lost in the technology, stripping away what it means for people, for each of us, to come to understand and to know something.

We continue to play on people's fears, as if that will move people out of their homes into public life, and have forgotten somehow that people have aspirations. We have a model of politics and public life that says, "I will motivate you by motivating your fears, your worst fears, the worst parts of you, the evil parts of you, at the exclusion of what makes us good and noble people."

I believe that we have come to a point where we watch Sally Jesse Raphael, Jerry Springer, movies and other shows — not that they are necessarily bad in and of themselves on occasion — but that a trend is developing in our society in which the aberration is now the reality, and the reality often does not count much for anything.

We cannot get out of the "waiting place" if we do not understand, nor are especially concerned about, what reality is. If we are going to continue to trade in the superficial. If we are going to

continue to tap people's fears, because the more we tap those fears, the farther people run from public life and politics. Our individual and collective actions each day, unfortunately, send us deeper and deeper into the "waiting place."

## MOVING TO A ROUND WORLD

**S**o, what needs to happen? I believe we do not need to tinker any more with the current paradigm of public life and politics; we need to step into a new one. I say this not just because we are approaching the next millennium, and that we should jump on the bandwagon of burgeoning change-of-century fads.

I believe this need reflects, more accurately, a point in history that calls to us, speaks to us, and says to us that it is time to step forward and exercise public life and politics based on a different set of characteristics, a different way of thinking. For continuing down the well-worn path we cannot build the kind of credibility and trust — between and among people and institutions — to lift ourselves out of the "waiting place," and to engage on the changing nature of our society and our world. People will not come forward unless there is credibility and trust. And these cannot be formed, unless we all come forward.

The struggle we face, then, is a conflict in how we see public life and politics. I use this metaphor: Our current practice of public life and politics is the equivalent of a flat world — superficial; based on seeing limited dimensions of public life; where we fail to deal with complexity and meaning. Where ambiguity is taboo.

What I am proposing is that we move to a round world model of politics and public life. One that has shape, dimensions, of such that when you bore into it, you come to reveal and discover and, ultimately, understand the essence of what is happening around us and why. Then new possibilities for moving forward emerge.

Here, then, are four examples of what it might mean to move from a flat world to a round world. Each example has direct implications, I think, for how we rebuild the connection between schools and communities.

The first example is about how we talk about our public dilemmas. In the flat world, we talk about issues in terms of conflict. Usually there are only two sides to an issue — and you must be either on one side or the other, or there is little room for you in the game. How many times have you watched debates, like welfare reform, over the last year? The debate was framed largely as either you are a hard-nosed person of the '90s, demanding that people on welfare get off it in the first two years, and that is it. Or, you are a person on the other side, who believes that it is

okay for people to remain on welfare indefinitely, and so you are a softy from the '60s. Of course, this is a parody of the debate, but this is often what it has sounded like.

Meanwhile, you are sitting there watching the nightly news with Tom Brokaw or Dan Rather, or any of those folks, and you find yourself saying, "Holy smoke, where did this debate come from? It does not speak to me, to my political, social, or religious convictions."

Indeed, when I talk to folks across the country, they observe that rethinking welfare is a tough challenge — a true dilemma. Yes, they say, we need to move people off welfare rolls as fast as we can for people's own benefit and the benefit of our government coffers. But you also hear in the next breath people assert that there is no simple solution, for if there was, we would have all enjoyed the fruits of such success by now.

So, what I hear people struggling over is this: How do we create a welfare program that is supportive of people, that truly provides a safety net? And how do we provide a program that nurtures people to move from welfare to self-sufficiency; and what does that mean for child care, health care, transportation, other kinds of issues? Finally, how do we include a third value, accountability? Because, in America, there should be no free ride. On welfare, as with many public dilemmas, people are yearning to develop a new synthesis, a new approach that

weaves together various values, and not to deal with them as isolated fragments — as if they have little relationship to one another.

This is indeed how we all think, in webs of concerns. Yet in the flat world, we seem to willy-nilly push aside how people think, demanding that we make choices based on superficial and meaningless labels or timelines — “off in 2 years” or “stay on indefinitely!” In the round world, however, we would ask what are the underlying tensions and values at work here, and how do we give ourselves enough room and time to sort them out and put them together? It is a different mode of operating, and a much different conversation emerges when it takes root. It often requires a different language, one that I have come to believe now lies dormant within each of us; we do not use it in public life. Listen for yourself to the public debate on a major concern, such as welfare, and then listen to what your conversations sound like when you and others spend any considerable time talking about it. One is of the flat world; the other of the round world.

The second example is about how we inform people. It is no secret that we have a society that is information happy. When it becomes clear that people may not understand an issue, like health

care or education, what is our reflex? We rush out to give people tons of information; to “inform” them and “educate” them.

We keep throwing more and more information at people. We all do it; it is how many of us have been taught.

But when we throw information at people over and over and over again, we paralyze them. People now have so much information they cannot make sense of it; they are unable to put together a coherent picture for themselves. This current situation reminds me of the kid who, the night before the final exam, crams to make up for a lost semester of studying. When he sits down to take the exam, nothing comes out. Of course, he has lots of information, but the unconnected bits and pieces of data remain as fragments, and the kid cannot find the necessary coherence to produce understanding and meaning.

That is the flat world. In a round world, what if we thought not about information, but about knowledge. Knowledge has different properties, different characteristics. Its purpose is to help people see and understand. To gain context. Perspective. To illuminate ambiguities and uncertainty and risk. To help people gain clarity of complexity. When you connect fragments of information, you generate relevance

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and meaning for people. When you generate meaning, people engage. And when people engage, they work on things — alone, and at times, even together, as partners in our public life.

In the flat world, a simple notion seems to drive us: A false belief that when we have data we have knowledge, and thus the “truth.” But in the round world, knowledge requires a vigilant and often never-ending pursuit of the truth, as no single truth exists on many public dilemmas. Knowledge requires a public journey together.

Third example: how we engage people. We often operate in this society as if all of us in the public world, in our public lives, are consumers. Think back to the 1993 health care debate. President Clinton drives from Pennsylvania Avenue up to Capitol Hill for a joint session of Congress to deliver his health care speech. The minute he finishes his speech, what happens? The news media start to take instant polls. CBS News even had this new, fancy set built for Dan Rather, complete with all sorts of new-fangled gadgetry. The questions in those polls asked: How is the health care plan going to affect you? Not, how is this health care plan going to affect us as a nation? Not, how do you see the relationship between yourself and society — how do your private needs possibly fit with broader interests, and how might you balance your needs and those of others? No, we were asked, day after day, how does this plan affect you?

Yet I seldom hear people, in any serious and genuine conversation, talk that way about health care. I hear people express heartfelt concern about what happens when someone brings their nine-year-old son into an emergency room and the first question asked is not, "How can I be of help," but, "Where's your insurance card?" I hear people talk about health care, not just in terms of themselves, but about how we as a nation will care for a parent who lives a thousand miles away? I hear people wonder aloud about their neighbor across the street who cannot seem to muster the dollars to take care of herself. She is ill; what are we going to do? It is indeed from a broader perspective that people seriously consider this and other public dilemmas; surely, they do not leave behind their private concerns and interests, but their concerns do not begin and end there.

In *Newsweek*, some days after the President announced his plan, there was a headline spanning the front cover, "How does this affect your pocketbook?" It was in red ink no less, which suggests fear.

Here is another example to consider. You may have heard about Vice President Al Gore's initiative, "Reinventing Government." If you have, you know that it is founded on a

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consumer, or customer approach. But wait a minute. When I think about government, I do not picture going to a Kroger's or Safeway or Giant Food, walking down the aisles, deciding that I like this little product over here and pulling it off the shelves. Do you? What comes into my mind is, "Heck, I own the government." We all do. That is what it means to live in a democratic nation. Indeed, our government is a reflection of who we are, what we believe, our priorities, and the kind of social compacts we want in this country. Please do not talk to me about customer service, as if I am some consumer buying soap. As if I am sitting around my kitchen table clipping coupons for government programs. But that is the language we use. So, it should come as no surprise to any of us that we tend to think of ourselves in public life largely as consumers; as consumers who make demands, claims — who want more and more, for less.

But what if, in the round world, we thought of ourselves, not as consumers, but as citizens; as people who are part of a larger community? As people who are not afraid to tackle tough dilemmas, as people who are willing and able to make choices and trade-offs about public dilemmas, such as schools and how they should relate to our communities? What if we thought

we had the capacity in this country to get together and work out our public dilemmas? Clearly, we would not be able to agree on everything, but my experience tells me we could agree on 70 percent.

What if we thought of ourselves more as citizens than as consumers, who have often acted as claimants, making demands on society? How might such a shift in perspective change the way we think about public life and politics? How might it prompt us to think differently about our schools? For instance, are our schools a product somewhere “over there” to be consumed, with relatively little responsibility placed on each of us; or, do our schools reside within us, because they are part of us, a very reflection of ourselves? I dare say, I believe that such a shift in perspective would change the way we think about our conversations about schools, and other public dilemmas, and the way in which we go about working in our communities and this nation.

My last example is about time. Somehow, it seems, we have created a stopwatch mentality in our society. I am sure you all face this time crunch every day. You must get your project done — and now! Your grant expires when momentum is just getting started. Indeed, you have to “solve” the most vexing public dilemmas in shorter time than

a new car is designed.

But wait. Society has a rhythm of its own. Our lives have a rhythm of their own. Yet we keep being told by funders, by ourselves, by the colleges and graduate schools at which we are educated, that we as professionals should make communities fit our

timelines, our grant schedules, our pronouncements of promised change that often serve only to create outlandish expectations and dashed hopes.

That flat world approach does not work. You cannot change society like you can switch stations on your television. It is not as if there is a remote control that we can click effortlessly to alter the rhythms of society. I think that we, as professionals, need to come to understand the rhythms of society so that our programs and initiatives work with those rhythms, take advantage of them, even accelerate them. For instance, when trying to develop a community’s public capital — how people talk, how they are connected to one another through informal networks, how different layers of community leadership form — we cannot expect significant change simply by creating a program and then declaring our work done some handful of months later, because now it is time to do something new. The evolution of communities takes

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time. The question I believe we must ask ourselves is this: Are we going to use a stopwatch to govern our work in society, or will we come to understand society's natural rhythms and what they mean for our work? In a round world, we are more cognizant of those natural rhythms because we have to catch them and understand them to be effective.

## LEADERSHIP FOR A ROUND WORLD

**S**o, what does the round world mean for leadership? If we are to operate in the round world, I believe it means a great deal. There are, of course, many dimensions of leadership to think about. Here are four to get us started.

Operating within a round world of public life and politics means that we must hold a much deeper understanding of our communities — a much, much deeper understanding. Yet the vast majority of people I have worked with over the years, when they think about community life, view the community almost as if they are going to a zoo. You know how you go to a zoo — you stop by the elephants, see the giraffes, go over to the monkey or reptile house — indeed, you are a visitor.

To exercise leadership in a round world, we cannot think of the community as something we visit.

We need to think of ourselves as part of the community. We need to see the community from the inside out, not from the outside in. We must understand the layers of civic life and what each layer can offer in terms of understanding the community and tapping into it. We have to listen deeply for how people talk about and seek to make sense of the public dilemmas in their lives; and in doing so, we ought to heed their personal stories and experiences and use of language to gain context, meaning, and perspective. Why? Not because we want to write a nice report, but because a deep understanding of a community provides a pathway for gaining knowledge and for informing how we go about our public work together.

Another dimension of leadership: I believe we need to start using the watchword “authenticity.” Here is a distinction I often make with journalists about this watchword. Authenticity and accuracy is not simply about getting the facts right. Sure that is part of it, but it is not its essence. The essence of authenticity and accuracy is to get the right facts. We tend to think this is easy, but you know as I do, that to get the right facts requires hard work. It means that you must hold a rich and subtle definition of knowledge.

Being authentic also means to capture the wholeness of a situation — different perspectives, ambiguity, tensions. Context also plays a vital role when it comes to authenticity. For context is what drives much of

people's connection to society. It is not the issue itself that affects context; rather, telling about an issue, on its own, as if in a vacuum, strips away for people needed relevance and meaning — it does not connect to anything new, to reality. It is the context around the issue and imbedded throughout it — that is the place from which relevance and meaning and connection emerges.

We need a different notion of accountability, too. Our current notion of accountability runs something like this: First, I get money from some grant or program; I have to make sure I can account for it, so I fill out all the required forms; I send in the forms on time, preferably a day or two early. Second, we answer this question too: We said we were going to X; did we do it?

What if we thought of accountability, in addition to these definitions, in a third way, which argues: Let us hold ourselves accountable to understand what we are learning. That is right — maybe our definition of accountability should be to hold ourselves accountable to learn. Perhaps we did hold only three meetings, but maybe along the way we realized that only three were necessary. What have we learned? What have we discovered to be most valuable as we have gone through

this work? Did we make the significant course changes as we came to learn?

But, there is a conundrum here. It is impossible to predict what is valuable about something before it happens; yet we ask people every day to determine their results long before their work ever begins and to stick to those predetermined results as guides, even measure their so-called success against those results, no matter what. To embrace this expanded notion of accountability, we must accept that some things we will not, indeed cannot, know until we try something and discern what it means. Only then can we implement a mindset of learning.

There is more about accountability. What if we thought about it less as a static notion, and more as a storyteller would who helps us to see a story unfold over time? This is what Americans tell us in our research and projects — that they seek to understand the unfolding of public action; to have a “public accounting” over time; essentially, to be a part of the action.

So, if you are working to change the relationship between schools and communities, people do not want to wait for the final report to hear about what has occurred; to know whether a seemingly intractable public dilemma has been “fixed,” or that failure is upon us. Rather, they seek

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leaders who come forth to lay out along the way, here is our progress thus far, here are the lessons and insights we are gaining, here is what we might expect in terms of future progress, here are our mid-course corrections. This is a form of accountability, a kind of public accounting, which can build relationships and credibility and trust.

*I believe that in a round world... it is possible to engage each other's aspirations, and to temper hate and acrimony and divisiveness.*

Last example of leadership in a round world. This sounds easy, but I have worked with very few political leaders or others who actually will make the necessary leap here. What if we started to believe in people's aspirations? To genuinely believe that we should hold more faith in people's good and noble sensibilities than we do in their desire for division, acrimony, and hate?

While these two perspectives certainly are not mutually exclusive, it seems to me that we must choose which of the two we will put more faith in. If you hold more faith in division, acrimony, and hate, my experience tells me that is the way things usually work out. But, if you are willing to make a leap to believe that people do have good and noble sensibilities, and that they can and will act on them given the right conditions, then you are talking about something quite different. Which will it be?

I believe that in a round world,

we need to reconstitute a belief that people are good and noble, even as evil occurs all around us. That it is possible to engage each other's aspirations, and to temper hate and acrimony and divisiveness. It is not going to be easy. And it is not some form of touchy-feely politics. This is the hard work of public life and politics in the round world.

By choosing to move in this direction, we can generate a renewed sense of possibility, a rising belief that we can move forward together because we believe in each other, or at least are willing to try to believe in each other; because we are willing to take a crack at working together; because we can try to reach that 70 percent of agreement, and leave the other 30 percent for another day. Round world leadership can help us get to a different place.

## SOUTH CAROLINA'S HARD TALK

Here in South Carolina we are seeking to bring many of these round world ideas to life through a project you may know of, called Hard Talk. It is about finding ways to connect schools and communities. It involves school boards at the state

and local levels, everyday citizens throughout South Carolina communities, business leaders, educators, and others. We are about to start this initiative in a handful of communities; then once the initiative is up and running, we hope for it to spread throughout South Carolina.

In these South Carolina communities, people will be getting together to demonstrate that they themselves can do a different kind of public business; that they can generate greater credibility and trust among each other; that they can begin to change how they think about the relationship between schools and their communities. I am sure that you will be hearing about Hard Talk in the coming months.

## LET US STAND UP

**W**hen we walk out these doors today, this question will remain: How do we move beyond the waiting place? I think it is a key question of our times.

The question reminds me of a poem, which I will close with, written by Maya Angelou for President Clinton's 1992 Inauguration. Listen carefully and deeply to these words for a moment:

*Today the rock cries out  
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.*

*You may stand upon me.  
But do not hide your face.*

I believe that the time is now in our country, in this state, and in the communities from which you come, that we stand upon the rock and assume the challenge of what it means to move to a round world — to get beyond the “waiting place.” Many of you are already up on the rock; if that is the case, then extend a hand so that others may come with you.

But always remember, there are people whom none of us know, people from all walks of life, in whose minds and hearts Maya Angelou's words ring. They are yearning to stand upon that rock, to no longer hide their faces, so that we can create a better country, a better state, a better set of communities and better lives for ourselves, our neighbors, and our families. As we move forth, let us, each of us, step out of the “waiting place,” up onto the rock, and begin to see the round world that awaits us.

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"Moving From A Flat World To A Round World In Public Life" by Richard C. Harwood appeared in [Vital Speeches](#), March 1, 1998. It is adapted from a keynote speech given at the South Carolina Primary Prevention/Healthy People 2000/Healthy Communities Annual Conference November 21, 1997, in Columbia, South Carolina.

