

## For Those Going Forward

(Excerpts from the final chapter of *Fifty Years in Public Causes: Stories From A Road Less Traveled* by Brian O'Connell, University Press of New England/Tufts University Press, 2005)

Young people often talk to me about what it's like to spend a career in nonprofits and they want to know if what I do is within what people consider public service. Nonprofit endeavor is still sufficiently vague that even public spirited young people find it hard to consider if it's right for them. Our conversations generally lead to whether I would advise them to follow my path or take a more traditional route through civil service or elective office. I always encourage them to think positively about civil service and politics but to realize that voluntary organizations and institutions provide another way by which public service is performed.

I'd like to think that careers like mine have helped widen the public's understanding of who and what is included in public service, extending not only to diverse careers but also to America's vast network of volunteers and to the concept of citizens as the primary office holders of government.

I've reached the stage of my own journey when I should lift up those learnings that are most important to underscore for those going forward for the next 50 years. After many false starts at that task, I decided to tell my readers what five priorities I would emphasize if I had another fifty years. As I worked on that effort I found myself consummately envious of your opportunities in the future. Not being able to be by your side is almost more than I can bear. God speed and good journey were never more heartfelt.

So, here is what I think is most important for civic leaders and the staff who support them to know and do in your own lifelong efforts to achieve maximum citizen participation and influence.

*ONE: Help Americans to understand and take pride in the extraordinary degree of participation and generosity that already exists.*

I want to provide tangible indications of the extraordinary range and influence of citizens through their voluntary and philanthropic organizations. Fifty percent of all American adults are now active volunteers and we give an average of four hours a week to the causes of our choice. The base of participation is also spreading. There are more young people, more men, and more older people. Every economic group is involved. We are the only country in the world where giving and volunteering are such pervasive characteristics of all parts of the population.

It's important to be very specific about how all this involvement translates into addressing human needs and aspirations. The following is a very short but still impressive list of what such people accomplish.

- In just the past twenty years, volunteers have broken through centuries of indifference to the needs of the dying, and as a result of their noble crusade, almost

every community today has hospice services providing relief to the terminally ill and their families.

- In very recent times, volunteers' passion, courage, and tenacity have forced the nation and every region in it to realize that we must preserve for future generations our precious resources of water, air, and land. That ethic and practice now affect every form of local and national asset, including wetlands, forests, farmland, historic buildings, and whole downtowns.
- Volunteers stood up and were counted for common decency and adequate services for mentally retarded children, and those breakthroughs showed the way to many others who then dared to do the same for cerebral palsy, autism, learning disabilities, and hundreds of other problems we hadn't even heard of twenty five years ago.
- With the earlier establishment and growth of Alcoholics Anonymous, volunteers pioneered AA's model of mutual assistance that today extends to almost every serious personal problem. In almost every community there is a group of people who have weathered the storm and are reaching out to others newly faced with such crises as a child's death, mastectomy, depression, stroke, or physical abuse. This is the fastest growing side of voluntary effort.
- Volunteers sang "we are not afraid," though of course they were – but with each new volunteer recruited to the civil rights crusade, their courage, confidence and power grew, and then when their vast army sang and believed "we shall overcome," they did. The civil rights movement then spread to every disenfranchised and underrepresented group, including women, the physically disabled, Native Americans, Hispanics, gays, and so many more.
- A few volunteers, at first mostly parents and students, believed they could do something about drunk driving, but despite its escalating ravages, most of us didn't think they would succeed. Thank God they did.
- Dealing with community problems was one thing, but some issues defied organization or were off limits for reasons of national security. However, some people believed that matters such as control of nuclear power were linked to survival and they stepped in, at their peril, to reduce our peril.
- Volunteers even began to take peace into their territory with people-to-people understanding as a fundamental step to reduce international tensions and to build tolerance and friendship.
- And all the time a healthy number of people served all of us by promoting the importance and availability of arts and cultural opportunities as central aspects of a civilized society. One of the great waves of voluntary activity and impact has involved community theater, dance, and music to provide opportunities for creativity and enjoyment of it.

The list goes on almost endlessly and whether one's interest is wildflowers or civil rights, arthritis or clean air, oriental art or literacy, the dying or the unborn, organizations are already at work, and if they do not suit our passion, it is still a special part of America that we can go out and start our own.

*TWO: Make It Even Better: Invest in capacity building so that voluntary organizations have an even greater chance to fulfill their essential missions*

The nonprofit sector is the most labor intensive of the three sectors but invests by far the least in its future. We worry about the effectiveness of our organizations, agree on the need to attract more bright young people, shudder at the implications of high staff turnover, talk endlessly about expanding the base of financial and volunteer support, and cringe at the paltry levels of investment available for planning and evaluation, but we turn our backs on all this common sense with the rationalization that we are too busy doing good and that no one will give us money to invest in these "extras" anyway.

When I try to talk about how much businesses spend on human resource development, leaders of voluntary organizations turn me off as though the comparisons were not fair. I generate some attention when I indicate how much money even small and medium-sized community governments spend on finding and nurturing young leaders, but the curiosity is mostly grounded in envy. Even volunteer leaders who come from business will only stay with me through the part of the conversation that relates to applying their own human investment practices, but their interest founders against immediate financial and service deficits.

Several years ago the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) undertook an interesting study to try to determine why certain of their local units do so much better than average. They assumed that the explanation would relate to the number of Jews in those communities, their per-capita income, or the number of Jewish-owned businesses. However, the largest factor by far turned out to be quality of staff as measured by its capacity to effectively involve and provide assistance to an increasing number of volunteer leaders. As a result of that study, the CJF reoriented its national operations to emphasize staff development, including the establishment of the Philip Bernstein Training Center, named after its own able staff director.

Over the years, including times of economic downturn and government cutbacks in support for the programs and services of voluntary organizations, I've met with at least 200 board and staff delegations seeking advice on fund-raising. I start with encouragement, but I follow up quickly with how much work is in store. I indicate that their organization must be prepared to devote at least 20 percent of its resources to fund-raising and that the board and chief staff officer will have to devote closer to one third of their time for the next few years. Despite their apparent conviction, the response is rarely, "If that's what it's going to take, we'll do it!" In the majority of cases, the reaction is rejection, anger, and insult.

Often the chief staff officer is the most offended. Those physicians, social workers, historians, or former foreign services officers are upset that I should undercut their professional status by putting them in such a substantial fund-raising role. I always try to convey that fund-raising is really a matter of the people who care about a cause and know it firsthand, telling the story with the same conviction that they tell it every day to colleagues, friends, and neighbors.

Most of these delegations leave shaking their heads, already thinking about finding more reasonable advice. Later, I hear that they have merged, reduced their focus substantially, closed, or are looking for a new executive director. I can predict that in the interim, they went into further deficit or secured a grant from a foundation or board member to hire a development director to whom they turned over the noxious assignment.

I know I'm being direct here, but it's deliberate. My primary message is to tell you how much you can do and to urge you to proceed with optimism. However, that would be irresponsible if I didn't couple it with the truest lessons I've ever learned in community organizing, all involving what it takes to launch and sustain a significant fund-raising effort.

Very often I find that organizations think of stewardship only as the prudent handling of funds, but it should also include building the greater capacity of the organization to fulfill its urgent purposes. I'm not calling for irresponsible high flyers but the careful planning and organizing of financial development.

At the time I was retiring from INDEPENDENT SECTOR (IS), I was requested to do a piece for the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *Fundraising Management*. Not surprisingly, I chose as my topic, "The Future Looks Good – For Those Who Invest In It," and I ended it, "for the organization that has a worthy cause, is open and accountable, and invests in its development, the outlook is very bright."

*THREE: Preserve at all costs the necessary independence of voluntary organizations to be the vehicles through which citizens express their collective hopes and dreams and their criticisms and outrage.*

No individuals or institutions are entirely independent of government but our democratic society depends substantially on the relative independence of philanthropic and voluntary institutions.

The IS Organizing Committee favored the name INDEPENDENT SECTOR because the most important element this sector represents in American society is its relative independence.

In the book *People Power* I wrote, "The impacts of voluntary action can generally be categorized as service, advocacy and empowerment and although each is important, the relative worth to society is in inverse proportion to the dollars and encouragement provided. As important as direct services are, they are to my mind and experience decidedly secondary to the functions of advocacy and empowerment where the dollars and staff are comparatively tiny but where the contributions to democracy are immense."

Over the fifteen years of my active leadership of IS there were eleven very serious efforts to limit the advocacy rights of voluntary organizations; they came at us from many different directions. In 1993 alone, there were five serious legislative and regulatory proposals that would have dangerously limited the advocacy rights of voluntary organizations and their funders. Successful efforts to defeat those threats took every speck of effort by every part of the IS coalition, but in the end we were able to prevail.

As I look back, I find it terribly disheartening to see how many of the same battles we have to fight over and over again. For example, it's heartbreaking that so many people in

government, in different administrations and parties, challenge the advocacy role and rights of our organizations. They just don't seem to understand that advocacy is often our best service. When they reflect on the great accomplishments of the sector, such as civil rights and child welfare, even they tend to cite the results of our advocacy activities.

Frederick Douglass expressed it this way: "Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing the ground. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters." Justice John Harlan interpreted it: "The constitutional right of free expression is powerful medicine in a society as diverse and populous as ours; that the air may at times seem filled with verbal cacophony is, in this sense, not a sign of weakness but of strength."

In my experience with CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, I was constantly reminded of the common truth of our times, that the small, everyday freedoms and the liberty of societies depend upon the degree to which citizens are allowed to have influence and do in fact exercise that power. Conversely, that experience made me all the more aware that to be denied or to lose those everyday rights is to be trapped in suffocating powerlessness. I also understood far better how much the rest of the world recognizes and envies our advanced state of what they often describe as buffer zones between government and the individual. Far better than ourselves, they realize what we've got and how absolutely essential it is to liberation.

*FOUR: Recognize and address the alarming shortfalls of citizen participation in democratic government*

Although Americans are impressively involved in volunteering we are strangely and alarmingly not often involved with government.

It is a fundamental precept of American Democracy that citizens are the primary office holders of government and we are dangerously neglecting that quintessential responsibility.

At its simplest, if we serve but don't vote something is terribly wrong with our democracy. If we insist that government performance be worthy of democracy but don't automatically encourage young people to run for office or serve in appointed or career positions, we establish a dangerous self fulfilling prophecy, and if in our voluntary organizations we are trying to deal with the most urgent needs of our times, whether education, health, poverty or peace, but fail to acknowledge and address government's essential roles in these same matters, we neglect the people and causes we champion.

I have spent fifty years as a staff officer in voluntary agencies and remain devoted to such endeavors, but a major learning from all that experience is that we make a mistake if we exaggerate what voluntary organizations can do, particularly if it allows us to exaggerate what government need not do.

Some views and the publicity they seem to attract and spread make it particularly hard to be objective and hopeful. For example, the publisher of Georgie Anne Geyer's book, *Americans No More: The Death of Citizenship*, describes her message as "Citizenship in the United States has changed drastically and for the worse."

The Kennedy School of Government at Harvard has undertaken a multi-year project, “Visions of Government for the Twenty-First Century,” which began with an analysis called “Why People Don’t Trust Government.” In the introduction of the book of the same title, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., sets out some of the concerns the school uncovered: “Confidence in government has declined. In 1964, three-quarters of the American public said that they trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time. Today only a quarter of Americans admit to such trust.

Perhaps the most dangerous indicator of attitudes toward government is that young people don’t want to get involved with it. A *New York Times* story by Adam Clymer reported that “...students say they give their time to help the homeless, tutor children and clean up polluted streams but they tell poll takers that their interest in public service does not extend to voting or even talking about politics.”

Through all the real and perceived problems between government and citizens, there are indications of ways to sort through what is really wrong and, as important, what is really right about government. There are ways for communities and leaders to determine and address major needs without going round and round on the useless notion that the crises are so overwhelming and the government so inept that progress isn’t possible.

For a good starting place, I go back to Nye and his co-authors who begin with “why people don’t trust government” but end with some revealing and encouraging findings. For example, Nye provides helpful balance to otherwise disturbing information about trust by indicating that “the public overwhelmingly thinks the United States is the best place to live [80 percent] and we like our democratic system of government [90 percent],” and then he observes, “something is steady.”

The Kennedy School book also provides fascinating examples of how far off the mark some of our impressions and even some of our largest concerns about government turn out to be. Derek Bok recounts a series of extreme misperceptions, such as “most people estimate that more than 50 cents of every dollar in the social security program is eaten up in overhead. The true figure is less than two cents.” He reports on more than seventy-five “specific objectives of importance to most Americans,” such as the economy, housing, and percentage of people graduating from high school, and concludes that despite the public’s assumptions to the contrary, “the United States has made definite progress over the past few decades in the vast majority of [the seventy-five] cases.” Bok acknowledges that some things are very wrong, such as our health care system, but by narrowing in on these we can make progress.

Here are a series of positive building blocks that I think can provide hope and direction for leaders struggling against negativism and hopelessness:

How proud Americans are of our country and democracy. (“Something is steady”).

How active and effective we are as participants in our voluntary organizations.

How wrong we often are in our generalized perceptions of the ineffectiveness of government.

How effective people can be throughout their neighborhoods and communities when they get aroused, involved and organized.

*FIVE: Teach participatory democracy*

If I had to reduce all of the messages and learnings of my journey and the book, it would be to build into every level of education a preparation for active citizenship and community service for all Americans.

When the country was founded, there were grave doubts about giving the vote and the right to hold office to most people, particularly the undereducated. When the principle of “citizens as the primary office-holders of government” was put forward, the debate intensified and was only narrowly won by Thomas Jefferson’s argument: “I know of no safe depository for the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”

“The civic mission of American education” is the formal dedication of the book *Civitas: A Framework for Civic Education*: “We believe that education for citizenship is the primary reason for establishing universal education in the American republic, i.e. the purpose to develop among all students, whether in private or in public schools, the virtue, sentiments, knowledge, and skills of good citizenship.”

Even in the face of these resolves and lessons, the subject of civics was gradually dropped for everyone. Now we wring our hands at the consequences and even allow educators to rationalize that the subject was not important or popular enough to continue or scholarly enough to reinstate. Fortunately, there are clear signs that thoughtful people are again realizing that we can’t exercise participatory democracy without educating and training people for their essential roles.

On the hopeful side, though it doesn’t yet add up to a national movement, there are several developments which indicate that thoughtful people are again realizing that we cannot exercise participatory democracy without educating and training people for their essential roles.

At the elementary and high school levels, a growing number of communities provide and encourage community assignments and intellectual opportunities in the classroom to understand what such participation means to the quality of society. “Community Service Learning” is the umbrella concept that has come to describe this encouraging and reenergized version of civics.

More than one thousand colleges and universities are now part of Campus Compact, which requires demonstrated commitment on the part of the institutions and direct involvement of their presidents “to help students develop the values and skills of citizenship through participation in public and community service.”

Other efforts to turn the tide come under such headings and course titles as core democratic values, the American Constitution, social capital, deliberative democracy, and civil society.

The trustees of Tufts University have recently amended the institution’s mission to indicate that the very definition of a Tufts education will include “orientation to and

preparation for a lifetime of active citizenship and public service.” To implement that sweeping initiative a university-wide college has been established to be certain that whether one graduates as a physician, artist, foreign service officer, philosopher or engineer each will be ready to perform as citizen.

Our democracy can last but only if we accept and practice the enduring covenant cogently summarized by John Gardner:

Freedom and responsibility  
Liberty and duty  
That's the deal.

It can only happen if we commit to that pledge and prepare our children and their children to pass it on.