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DEMOCRACY, DELIBERATION, AND CONSENSUS BUILDING

Thoughts on a New Braid

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“Democracy is good. I say this because other systems are worse.”

- Jawaharal Nehru

Above all else, democracy is founded on a resolute belief that citizens can govern themselves. Not only can they, they should. Democracy (from the Greek demos, "people," and kratos, "rule") assumes that most ordinary people have the capacity, the means, and the will to participate in the making of key decisions. These three impulses – capacity, means, and will -- directly shape the common good. Paradoxically, the means for exercising these three impulses requires us to manage and embrace a variety of ever-present polarities: conflict vs. cooperation; deliberation vs. problem solving; communication vs. negotiated problem solving; formal procedures embodied in the laws, rule, and procedures of our political institutions vs. the informal and often ad hoc assemblies that are invented more in the moment. All of these dualities need each other. It is not “versus.” It is “and.” We require both.

In the U.S., and perhaps in other democracies, something seems to be going wrong with the idea of self government. The undertaking of deliberation and decision-making at the federal, state, and local levels is too complex, too remote, too confused, and too self-absorbed by elites. Whether the discussions and determinations emanate from Washington D.C., the state capitol, or a county council, I hear a persistent complaint in my work as a public policy mediator that personal involvement doesn't count and cannot really change anything. Is it cynicism, fatigue, or something more? Whatever is going on, fragmentation and balkanization continues and fewer and fewer people seem to see themselves as part of a central polity.

Ironically, this takes place at the very moment when former private “problem” spheres become ever more public. On any given day the larger realities of post 9/11 security, economic development, cleaning up pollution, stabilizing climate change, reducing crime, securing energy production, reducing homelessness, and improving poor student performance in our educational system touch us personally. Public problems do not respect conventional boundaries. No one sector – governmental, industrial, and civic – owns them. Technical remedies are insufficient. No one agency of government has full jurisdiction to solve them. No one special interest group has the power to force a solution. No one discipline or mental model can fully explain them. No one locale can wall itself off deal with them exclusively.

This is a challenge to those of us who look through the two binocular lenses of deliberative political theory and the theory and practice of conflict resolution. At our gathering on June 24-25, 2005, we explored the seeming distinctions and tensions

between these strands and found interesting differences and similarities. We all seem to agree that our current democratic structures and processes are insufficient. They must be supplemented. We all seem to agree that the steady infusion of raw opinion polls is insufficient, even though they are the high octane jet fuel of politics. There was, in this regard, a broad recognition that conventional polled opinions are uninformed, do not admit of dialogue, and actually inhibit deliberation.

Important differences also emerged. Notions of negotiation and problem solving seemed absent from the deliberative democracy theorists. It is unclear how and when conversations ever conclude and how and when citizens move from discussion to action. In the press of problem solving, however, conflict resolution theorists may fail to capture and deepen opportunities for dialogue and for bringing greater numbers of viewpoints into discussion. Further, the words “deliberate,” “deliberation,” and “deliberative” remained comfortably but perplexingly undefined by all of us. Our uses of the words ranged from a set of specific techniques and methods, to a set of set of relationships, to a utopian conception of a future society.

So where to next? Much more discussion, of course. More opportunities for exchanges like we had. More research and more case examples and well examined case studies. Most of all, I think we need to hatch plans. I believe we must take a 25-year one generation view and begin to do precisely what the neo-conservatives did 25-years ago. We must begin to be systematic at articulating the essential values that collectively underpin our thinking and imagine a new political “braid” that weaves and twines separate strands into a more coherent, practical, and intentionally political school of thought. The starting points will be those shared values we have now: the legitimization and valuing of differences (as opposed to the current intolerance of them); civil and civic participation in the great issues of the day (as opposed to control of those discussions by elites); and the creative uses of conflict to help solve tough problems and build enduring relationships in the polity.