

Understanding The Common Good

I have a friend, Sharon, whose grandparents helped settle the state of Kansas. Sharon is quick to point out that for the first two years they and the other settlers chose in “soddies” –sod homes until two wooden structures were built. At best those homes must have been damp, dark and cold; yet they all chose to stay in their soddies and participate in the building of the two buildings in the heart of their new town.

When I ask the participants in seminars to guess which two wooden structures were built. Without hesitating most groups guess correctly – the church and the school. I then ask the participants, how do you know that?

My sense is that we many of us know the answer, not because we remember some obscure fact of history, but because the same sentiment and instinct that was present in the hearts of those grandparents is present in our hearts too.

Then I ask why did they build the school and the church first? Participants quickly conclude that these structures represent an investment in their collective lives – an investment in community. They also go on to say that settlers understood the vulnerability of going it alone and know that an investment in community was an investment in their own best future.

Deep down many of us we realize that the good life involves not just goodness for our individual lives but also goodness for our lives together. In some deep way, we know that we are connected to each other and that when we are at our best we know that good life calls us beyond ourselves to the concerns and interest of the community.

The common good is one of those ideas that is both illusive and yet central to our lives together in a free society. During some of my seminars I will ask people what comes to mind when they hear the phrase the common good – here are some of the images that are shared most often: Enough for everyone, fairness and concern for all involved.

My favorite definition of the common good has two parts; liberty and justice for all and an additional measure of mercy and compassion for the least fortunate and the most vulnerable.

The first phrase is familiar to many of us as the closing line of the *Pledge of Allegiance*. On a daily basis all over the United States, students, Rotarians and others place their hand over their hearts and pledge themselves to liberty and justice for all.

Francis Bellamy wrote the pledge in 1892 and when you hear the pledge against the backdrop of the recently concluded Civil War you can hear the plea for unity and healing between the north and south.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

(Under God was added in 1954 after a successful lobbying effort by the Knights of Columbus)

As noble as Mr. Bellamy’s efforts were, limited by the cultural norms and unconscious bias of his time, when he used the word “*all*” he had something less than all in mind.

He probably did not mean women, black Americans, eighteen year-olds and persons with disabilities.

More than one hundred years have passed since the writing of the pledge and during that time a series of movements have occurred in the United States that have asked American's to be sincere about our use of the word "all". The Women's movement, Civil Rights Movement, The 26th Amendment to the Constitutions giving 18year-olds the right to vote and the Person with Disabilities Act, in their own way simply asked us to redeem the word "all"

It is as if liberty and justice were a campfire giving off warmth and light. Some people, by accident of birth are born around the campfire and unquestioning they enjoy the benefits of warmth and light.

Others by accident of birth are uninvited around the campfire of liberty and justice and if you are not in the warmth and the light you are by default in the cold and the dark. Life is much more treacherous lived in he cold darkness and there are many sub-populations in the United States who still endure that injustice.

Someday, in spite of the evidence, I believe America will mean all. I have lived in other nations and the United States still has a chance to be the first to live out the truth of e pluribus unum. But until that day we need the second half of the definition. Until that wonderful day when "all" finally means "all" -- justice requires that we offer an additional measure of mercy and compassion to the least fortunate and the most vulnerable.

My wife Sandy and I have two children – Nic and Ben. They are now in their twenties but when they were six and five we encountered a family challenge that taught me a great deal about many things including what justice means and what justice requires.

Sandy and I, like most new parents, worked at giving Nic and Ben equal amounts of opportunity, time and attention. We believed in justice and sought to model that value in our family life. Their birthday gifts were always of approximate equal value (their birthdays are only two weeks apart and we were further inspired because they were watching closely) If one signed up for T-ball the other could sign up for a similar event or activity. I thought we were a family that practiced justice, but in truth we practiced fairness.

The distinction became clear when one of our sons was diagnosed with a significant learning disability. At first we were deeply hurt and troubled on behalf of our son, but the School District had wonderful suggestions for how to support him.

We bought supplies and equipment that accommodated his learning challenges; we signed him up for a tutor and had countless meetings with teachers and other support staff at his schools to agree on learning and support services plans. He received more family time, resources and support. One day after months of supporting our child's need, I shared with Sandy that I was feeling guilty and torn that our other son was not being treated fairly. Sandy in her usually down-home clarity said we are giving additional support to one of our son's for one reason – he needs it!

Then it occurred to me -- our child with the learning disability was in a more vulnerable position and relative to traditional learning measures he was also less fortunate. His particular circumstances required additions measures of mercy and compassion. It also occurred to me at that very moment that efforts to promote justice often require unfairness.

I sat down with our other son – to whom learning came easy. I confided with him that his brother had a special need and would be getting more family time and financial resources. I asked him how he felt and I was prepared for an understandable emotional reaction from a child. To my

astonishment he responded with the exact same words as Sandy, “That’s ok, he needs it and I don’t.” Wow!!!

Our son was born into special circumstances and he required more resources to give him a good start in life. Based on circumstances in our common life in the United States what other special circumstances that demand justice, still require unfair distribution of resources? Children born in poverty, racial minorities and women are still disadvantaged in U.S. Society – on behalf of our fellow citizens what shall we do? On a global scale the people of Darfur, Chad and Myanmar struggle for daily bread, while many of us in developed nations enjoy small daily luxuries (lattes, movies and golf, I enjoy all three). On behalf of our global neighbors what shall we do?

A society’s greatness is determined not on how well the elite fare but the degree of mercy and compassion which is extended to those who by accident of birth find themselves far removed from the campfire and enduring the cold and dark side of life.

The common good is a powerful, demanding but a richly rewarding concept that has the power to inspire us to create a just and sustainable global society. The common good is not some distant ethereal philosophical concept but a way of articulating the best of our human nature. The people in Kansas who chose to live in sod homes until the school and church were built are not anomalies alien to our own capacity for goodness and sacrifice – they are us – we are them – we know how to reach out on behalf of the common good because it is part of our human nature –it is the best of our human nature, but it within our reach. The common good does not exceed our grasp! We can have more of it if we really want it.

What would happen to our understanding of leadership if the common good became leadership’s core purpose? What would the world and our collective future look like if the common good became the central consideration of leaders? What practices would leaders engage in order to advance the common good and how would those leaders become shaped by choosing to become stewards of the common good.

Leadership’s purpose would be dramatically reshaped if the ultimate goal in all sectors were to advance the common good! Just as we saw in the wisdom of the early Kansans the common good is the foundation stone for a good society. The good society is not some abstract concept but the net result of people and institutions choosing the good in each situation. The good society is a culmination of good nations, good cities, good institutions and good people who at every turn seek to balance the human instinct for self-interest with our nobler ability to concern ourselves with the greater good.

Most of us want our children and grandchildren to grow up in good neighborhoods, attend good schools and become good citizens. These desires become realized as a direct result of what we invest our time and money. If we privatize our investments of time and money and only invest in our own children and build gated communities to secure our private homes – we should not be surprised the common nature of our lives suffers.

As we huddle ever closer around the campfire of liberty and justice while other in the cold and dark suffer our collective lives diminish in at least two ways.

First, people left in the cold and the dark to long will soon get in touch with their discontent. Discontent left festering to long can be a breeding ground for destructive behavior. Langston Hughes asked: “What happens to a raisin in the sun –

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over –

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

I am reminded of a political cartoon. The cartoon depicts people on a large boat. On one end of the boat white people are dressed in tuxedos and gowns drinking champagne and enjoying good food. At the other end of the boat people of many hues stand around in old clothes looking sad and one young man with a gun is shooting holes in the floor of the boat and sea-water bubbles up covering the floor. The caption is from the voice of one of the men on the opulent side of the boat who says, “Will you look at that fool shooting holes in his end of the boat!

We cannot realistically expect stable and secure lives when others – our neighbors suffer for want of the basics. There is a cautionary truth in the statement -- whatever diminishes one eventually hurts everyone. Conversely the noblest work individuals, institutions and nations is not that we carve out privileged and secure lives for ourselves; but rather that we offer our lives in service to others -- especially the most vulnerable. That is the wisdom hidden in the common good, by investing in the good of the greater whole we actually invest more deeply in our own happiness.

“Common” is the combination of two Latin words *cum* and *munis*. *Cum* means “together” and *munis* means “ready to serve.” Therefore, what we hold in common is that which, together, we are ready to serve. Then the question is what do we hold in common?

Clearly, individuals can have common goals, agendas, and intentions that are not intended for the “good.” So what happens when we combine common and good? For Aristotle, the “good” was the ultimate end towards which individuals and society should strive. Thus, the remaining question is, “towards what ultimate and noble ends are we willing to serve together?” That question, born of sincere concern for the common good is precisely where the leadership’s purpose is dramatically reshaped and deepened.

What would our collective future look like if the common good became a central concern for leaders everywhere?

The common good is not the product of some pre-written handbook or some lofty economic equation as it is the quality of our daily interactions with each other and the questions, challenges and opportunities we collectively face.

We have all been in a place where the quality of love was palpable. Love seemed to fill the air, and was a contagion that proliferated to all who entered into its presence. The common good comes to life in a similar fashion.

It is our concern for others that animates the common good. When one person, or a small group, decides to live life with an other-oriented focus, the common good is advanced. It begins as a trickle; one act, one decision starts the flow of goodness into a community or organization. If the trickle that began in inspiration continues in determination, large impacts are possible. Just as the water of a brook can smooth the rough edges of rocks, so too our daily concern for each other

can transform the jagged places in our organizations and communities into gracious spaces where the best of the human person can emerge.

As these acts of generosity persist over time, they contribute to a culture of kindness. There will be circumstances when the agents of goodness will feel taken advantage of by those still addicted to narrow self-interest. But goodness often begets goodness. As others see that it is safe to set aside the armor of self-preservation, like a small mountain stream, the practice of the common goodwill widen overtime. We do not need to be satisfied with relationships marked by suspicion and fear that cause us to live in the deserts of greed and isolation. We can send forth streams of living waters that will transform our dry lands into gardens of generosity and compassion where goodness will cascade into our lives.

The common good is established through the choices of individuals, institutions, communities and nations. The common good is made up of good families, good neighborhoods, good institutions, good cities and good nations. In each case the common good emerges anytime a person or a group places their needs in the context of larger needs in their midst and like the early Kansas, defer some personal satisfaction and comfort for the sake of the greater good and the future. In this way the common good is the foundation stone for civilization, environmental stewardship, good life.

We have been examining the common good in poetic and metaphorical terms, in part, because its essence is deep and rich and needs figurative language. But the common good also invites practical understanding and action if it is to be made more manifest.

There are tangible practical behaviors that individuals and groups can practice in order to become more talented stewards of the common good.

The first behavior we can practice is *sensitivity and awareness*. Another way to look at this is to ask ourselves who or what (homeless or salmon, migrant farm workers or old growth forests, sexual minorities or bees) is uninvited around the campfire in your community on your watch?

At first blush we might think sensitivity and awareness are normal and natural behaviors and that we practice them all the time. At some level many of us are sensitive and practice this behavior regularly -- we hold open doors for a parent pushing a stroller, we stop and give directions to a forlorn tourist who looks lost and we might send money to support international relief efforts.

But at another level you and I have the capacity to remain unaware and insensitive.

Consider this story from my life – I was twenty four years old and traveling in Germany.

I got off the bus and walked up to the gates of a chain-link fence, with razor wire rolled over the top. The gates were wide enough to allow truckloads of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, political dissidents and disabled persons to be transported to this den of horror.

The first building I saw was a plain wooden structure with a simple wooden sign to the right of the door, which read “showers.” Once inside, it became clear that this was no shower. Fake showerheads, tightly sealed doors and vents around the base of the floor revealed this was a gas chamber! Bodies from the “showers” were removed to the far end of the camp and stacked like cords of wood until the ovens started in the evening. As the ovens roared, smokestacks belched putrid remains into the night air.

I experienced the sickening silence, sterile orderliness and spiritual barrenness that engulfed this death camp and mocked those who suffered unimaginable torture.

Those who escaped the gas chamber and ovens were shackled into hard labor, to undergo the brutality of guards and relentless monotony of roll calls. During roll call, these deprived and emaciated people stood motionless in bitter cold and sweltering heat, trying desperately not to draw attention to themselves. Those who flinched, slumped or coughed endured beatings, wrist hangings, medical experimentation, public flogging or execution.

It was -- and still is -- impossible for me to fully absorb the completeness of the evil that reigned over that place. My visit to Dachau changed me forever.

In retrospect, it was too much for a 21-year old to comprehend. Alone, without friends or family to share this experience with, I took it in and pondered it in my heart for a long time. Nevertheless, the most shocking sight was yet to come.

As I left the camp, I should have turned to the right to go back to my bus stop and Munich. But for a moment, my eyes cast down the road to the left. There, just about a quarter mile down the road, was a cluster of buildings. These small stores and homes were the village of Dachau. I was saddened to my core. People lived practically next door to the concentration camp! The camp was built as they rode their bikes to market. Victims arrived loaded into cattle cars and trucks while the villagers strolled to church. And the foul stench of burning corpses had filled the air as they tucked their children into bed. They had eyes that did not see, ears that did not hear, and hearts that did not grieve. Why?

We typically assign blame for the evil deeds done during the Holocaust to the Gestapo or the SS. Certainly, those groups must endure the majority of responsibility. But recent books written by Germans conclude that average German citizens actively complied with these murderers. To win favor with a feared regime, neighbors turned in their Jewish, homosexual, Gypsy, disabled and politically dissident neighbors to the teeth of this horrific machine.

These findings have stirred deep pain and controversy in Germany. In response, some have replied, "I lived during those times, and if I had only known the Holocaust was going on, I would have done something about it."

My first response is to reject their assertion as hogwash. But then I remember that I truly can't be certain what these people knew or didn't know. Having never lived under an oppressive regime, it is impossible for me to say how I may have acted. And I also realize that if I were in their shoes right now, I'd want someone to offer me mercy and compassion. With this in mind, I begin to grow in understanding for Holocaust-era Germans.

Still, if we assume for a moment that Germans' "not knowing" was real, then we are stuck with a bitter realization: apparently, it is possible to live down the street from a death camp and not know it exists. Apparently, we can be living beneath the stench of smokestacks, hearing the sound of gunshots and children shrieking in horror, and "not know." We know, but we don't know. We see, but we don't take it in. We hear, but it doesn't register. We feel, but at a level we can dismiss.

As stewards of the common good we must realize that as humans we have the capacity for self-deception and we must learn to recognize when we are turning a blind eye to the injustices in our midst. We do not turn a blind eye because we are bad, we unconsciously chose not to see or hear, because it's painful to open our hearts and minds to the atrocities that are going on, on our watch. But unless we open our hearts and endure the pain, we can't get in the game.

If we want to become more effective stewards of the common good the entry price is pain. But that is not the final note, because to those who are willing to endure the pain of their times comes the amazing gift and power of compassion.

Compassion means to suffer with, to feel the pain of another deep in our hearts and soul. Compassion stirs up in us capacities we never knew we had. Moved by compassion shy people can become public advocates and stoic people learn the power of their tears to move others around them to action.

Jamal is a Sufi. As he and I were becoming friends we traded stories from our youth. One of the first stories he told me was that his father, like him, was a Sufi master, but his father also served as a Rainmaker in India. Jamal said, one day when I was very young I asked my father, “Father why do you go away from home for such long periods of time – I miss you when you go away. His father answered tenderly, “My son I am a rainmaker and when the leaders of a village call it is because their people have suffered very much and I feel a need to go and help. Jamal asked with wide-eyed wonder, “Father how do you make it rain?!” His Father replied simply, “I go to the village that is in need and I remain with them until their pain becomes my pain – then I pray and then it rains.

Compassion is this amazing gift that comes to those willing to look past the comforts of the campfire and connect with those who live and struggle in the cold and dark.

We may not all become rainmakers, or even policy makers but we can all become difference makers moved by compassion to make the world a better place.

When we are touched compassionately by the pain of others, something in the human spirit that responds with generosity. We write checks, we fill sand bags and we serve meals in the hope of alleviating suffering.

We also have the capacity to respond proactively and become stewards of public policy or public institutions that anticipate and seek to prevent harm.

My great-grandfather, Joe Pichet, was born in the Province of Quebec. He was the youngest son of nine children of a Catholic French Canadian farm family.

While a young man in Canada, he moved to Massachusetts, and started a dairy farm. His farm was located on what is now Massachusetts Avenue, where Cambridge becomes Arlington.

His farm bordered with several others farmers who shared a common practice. Whenever one farmer’s fields were no longer sufficient to sustain their cows, the farmer in the adjacent field would lay aside the fence dividing the properties to let the neighbor’s cows graze. Farmers did this knowing that next year they, in turn, might need help from their neighbors.

This practice was common among what my great-grandfather called the “Old Yankee farmers.” However, they did not include my great-grandfather in the practice, presumably because he was French Canadian.

When his fields or stored grain were not sufficient to support his cows, he would instead lead them down Massachusetts Avenue eight miles into Boston and take them to the Boston Commons. This Commons was established, in part, so that no farmer for any reason, including discrimination, would be without the basics for their livelihood.

The Boston Commons is a living example of stewardship. There are countless examples of other “commons” through the U.S. and around the world, but we are in need on many more. The truth is every neighborhood, community, village, town and city will be made more civilized if thoughtful stewards become social architects and design and build new commons capable of supporting creation’s physical, social emotional and spiritual needs.

These practices – daily choices will shape a brighter future than we can imagine and a some level stewardship of the common good simply means being a good neighbor and choosing to lay down our fences for our local and global neighbors so that each might have sufficient grain for the day.

Just as these practices shape a more just and sustainable world, these same practices shape us. Throughout our lives we shape our own character by our choices and behaviors. Some say we compose our own lives, others say we are the master of our destiny, but in both cases the point is that we are what we **do** everyday.

How do our lives become shaped if we choose, on a daily basis, to serve as stewards of the common good? The following Shaker hymn, familiar to many, gives great insight the architecture of our personal lives are well-shaped through our commitment to publicly advocate for the common good.

*'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gain'd
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd,
To turn, turn will be our delight
'Till by turning, turning we come round right.ⁱ*

The familiar words from this inspired Shaker tune capture the essence of the common good – the place just right. The common good is a physical place (the Commons, small town in Kansas our own neighborhood) place but if we dance with the common good long enough the Spirit of beautiful creation also take up residence in our hearts, minds and souls and shapes our lives with gifts that only Spirit can provide.

The hymn point to three gifts –simplicity, freedom and humility, bestowed on stewards here is a brief look at each.

In a world bent on materialism, simplicity is a gift that is hard to recognize at first. Our modern culture encourages us to have as much ”stuff” as possible. Comedian George Carlin says that the some of us even rent storage spaces because we can’t fit all our “stuff” into our homes all at once. In this light simplicity might seem like a copout.

But what if it is not a copout but an opt-out. Simplicity allows s to opt–out of the rat race of consumerism and the goal of having and hoarding.

My family and I had the pleasure of visiting El Salvador to join in the celebration of the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero. We stayed in a newly built community called Ciudad Romero and live, work and ate with the people of El Salvador for 10 days.

Irma served as our host and prepared our meals. Her home was simple and even with an earthen floor her home was among the cleanest I have ever seen. Her children neatly dressed, greeted us

each day with a shy politeness that was refreshing and charming. While no one family in Ciudad Romero had too much they each had enough. One family in the village recently lost their husband/father in a farming accident. While the family was heartbroken and less well off now than their neighbors they were not in want for anything of the basics. Their neighbors freely and graciously shared from their meager means. At first I thought this sharing might have come from the realization that life in El Salvador was unpredictable and they could be next. Upon further reflection I know see the resident of Ciudad Romero more like the early pioneers of that town in Kansas, they were creating something new literally from the ground up. Without infrastructure neighbors were the safety nets for each other – the common good was a lived necessity

The goal was not endless gathering for oneself but a sense of enoughness so that there was indeed enough for all. In the midst of the simplicity we observed these people cry over loss and struggle, and we joined them at campfire and listened to their stories of hope, promise and solidarity. Even though they lived on edge of life children played, people played guitar, sang and danced and laughed in the midst of this community that cared. Irma and the people of Ciudad Romero gave me a glimpse of how good simplicity tastes and feels. And how it is a surprising gift that comes from directing our concern beyond our immediate needs and onto the broader needs of the community.

The hymn also reminds us that it is a gift to be free. In the U.S. we pride ourselves on being the “land of the free and the home of the brave”. In recent years our sense of “free” has become narrowed to our protectionist effort against too much government or the threat of terrorism or foreign rule of some sort.

However freedom is a much broader concern than just political freedom. Franklyn Roosevelt said in an address to Congress in 1941, that in addition to freedom of Speech and freedom to Worship that a democracy was responsible for providing freedom from fear and freedom from want.

However, today in the United States many of us are fearful of making ends meet. I strongly suggest that this fear is born of our powerful framework of individualism. The people of Kansas and Ciudad Romero knew they could not make it on “their own” and so they allowed themselves the gift of being held by the community in the web of community called – the common good.

We need more freedom in the United States and in this case today we need to be freed from the bondage of the myths of self-sufficiency and individualism. The common good invites us to trade in the burden of individualism for the gift of community. The common good will teach us that the only place for our fears and worries is in community because it is the only place strong enough to hold them.

As we get off our high horse of individualism and “come down to the place we ought to be – the place just right – twill be in the valley of love and delight. That place is community.

The third gift is humility – ‘to bow and to bend we shant be ashamed’. There is no need to be ashamed of our humanity -- of our need for each other. What is about an infant that melts most adult hearts? It is not their power, independence, and certainly not their title or resume. What melts our hearts is their vulnerability! The infant unashamed reaches out in need and in doing so brings delight to others.

Humility comes from Latin “humus” – ground. Humus is that amalgamation on the forest floor comprised of leaves, twigs, fur and bird poop. It all mixed together becomes mulch – plant food.

Humus reminds us that at some level we are all made of the same stuff not just humans of all races but all living beings are at some level made of the same basic stuff.

Humility is not about self-deprecation – “ah shucks I’m not good enough”. Humility is this realization of interconnectedness – humility gives us the eyes to see that we are not masters of creation but a part of it. Our purpose is not to dominate control or manipulate anyone or anything but to seek to live in harmony with all life.

In humility we recognize that we are part of a complex web of life that we scarcely understand. So we interact with all life reverently and respectfully as part of not apart from others – recognizing that our very lives might be dependent upon vulnerable neighbors, creatures and flowers that we might easily overlook.

So we seek to be in right relationship with all life and the systems that support life. The common good is just that the realization that we are connected in inescapable networks of mutuality and that our deepest desire is to humbly accept our role in the network of life and that is the day *when true simplicity is gain'd*

As the folks in Kansas endured sod homes as they worked to create their new community, there must have at times turned to concern for their own creature comforts as the slow progress was made on the two community building. As doubts arose, in my imagination I can hear them humming the Shaker hymn and watch them watch turn their hearts back to the community they were starting and turn their minds back to the promises they made to each other.

The common good invites us to the same work today. Bowing to the call of the common good, bending our will for the sake of the greater good and doing so unashamed because we know they were engaged in a work that is bigger than any one of us and that they we like our Kansas ancestors are laying foundation stones for generations yet to come.

As we practice turning from the sirens of greed and turn towards to the song of generosity as we turn from the anemic nature of individualism and towards power of healthy community and finally as we turn from the myth of scarcity to the truth of abundance this turning towards the common good will become our new habit. Then, *to turn, turn will be our delight, 'Till by turning, turning we come round right.*ⁱⁱ

i Simple Gifts The song composed in 1848 by Shaker Elder Joseph Brackett as an easy-to-learn tune for Shaker worship -- extolling the virtues of a simple life -