

**"Passion and Compassion
in Community Life"**

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It's little wonder that fear seems to be dominating much of our political, social and private lives today. Insecurity and worries about the economy, the availability of day care and education for our children, the sanctity of certain Constitutional rights -- all this and more has thrown a shadow of uncertainty over our daily endeavors and hopes for the future. When uncertainty is your destination, fear is eager to be your driver. Fear has the power to distort reality, magnify flaws and spread its altered perceptions faster than a speeding legislator on the way to Boston. Fear and uncertainty also conspire to produce cynicism, which helps propel the cycle of despair.

The result is that one by one entire professions and institutions that once were held up as positive influences in our society are now held in contempt, mistrusted, toppled in the public mind by the sins often of only a few. It seems now that all businesspeople are greedy, all clergy are suspect, all teachers are incompetent, all attorneys are corrupt, and all politicians are, well, all of the above. Our society has become so focused on the negative that we seem to be driving ourselves into a depression of the spirit.

How did this happen? How did one of the wealthiest nations on earth, with one of the highest living standards, fall into this cycle of despair? How can a nation that has been at the forefront of virtually every major industrial, scientific and medical breakthrough this century see little but gloom as the next century approaches? How did a nation of dreamers and revolutionaries become so shortsighted and disaffected?

One of the answers, I believe, invokes one of the oldest American conflicts, one that, paradoxically, is the source of our greatest successes and the cause of our most regrettable failings.

Throughout much of our history a tension has existed between the needs of society and the desires of the individual. For the most part we have been willing, when necessary and reasonable, to subordinate individual desires for the greater good of the community, for the common wealth, if you will.

The idea behind this was that a strong community created the type of environment that would foster strong and prosperous individuals. But that notion has been turned on its head in recent years, most notably during the 1980s when the Reagan revolution, with its tax breaks, spending increases and laissez-faire philosophy of government, established the market forces of capitalism as the arbiters of public policy.

Under the slogan "a rising tide lifts all boats," this revolution promised that if the wealthiest, strongest, individuals were liberated from high taxes and government regulations, their individual prosperity would result in an even higher standard of living for the rest of us. The reality proved to be far different.

Instead of prosperity for all, we have incomprehensible debt for decades to come, virtually guaranteeing that for the first time in our nation's history the younger generation will not live better, or perhaps even as well, as its predecessors. Instead of all boats rising, we have the poor and middle class sinking further and further and a few, a very few, amassing greater and greater stores of wealth. And that money has not been reinvested in America. The deterioration of our cities, our schools and our industrial base testify to the damaging effects of wealth without responsibility. Instead of uniting us, the economic revolution of the '80s has sowed the seeds of fear and pulled us apart.

The consequence of this is that most of us feel we will never get ahead. So we work harder to keep what we have and, out of a combination of fear and necessity, focus our energies almost exclusively on maintaining ourselves and our families, very often neglecting the needs of our neighbors and our communities. We seem to have little time or inclination anymore for coaching little league, joining civic organizations, even participating in government.

And that includes voting on Election Day. I think Election Day is a truly miraculous day, not only because I've won a few, but because on that day the whole community is at work together crafting a vision for the future. Although the action itself, the pulling of a lever or the checking of a box, is very private, based upon individual judgments, concerns and desires for the community, voting is a communal event. When it's over, the blueprint is established and those elected begin carrying out the business of governing. But fewer and fewer people are voting. Why?

Has it become an inconvenience? Is it the demands of work and family? The apathy that often accompanies despair and cynicism? Is it just part of the vicious cycle?

When the public mistrusts government and responds with cynicism, apathy, even disdain,

government, without a clear mandate or public support, sacrifices long-term vision for quick-fix solutions. No one is satisfied. Fingers are pointed, accusations fly until no one, or at least very few, want to have anything to do with solving the problems in our communities.

Granted it is a challenge to have faith that we can make a difference. Our problems often seem insurmountable, complex, beyond our control and understanding. When we don't know what to do, we often shrink from the responsibility of doing something -- like voting -- to make our situation better.

Unfortunately, our failure to participate in the democratic process serves only to breed more cynicism, which feeds fear and despair, which powers the cycle even more.

And very often the media don't seem to be much help in overcoming this cynicism. I am reminded of this by a story I heard about a stroll President Clinton took along the Potomac River several months after he took office. Battered by unrelenting negative press reports, the President decided to take a walk to mull things over.

The economy is improving, the deficit is coming down, government is being streamlined, all these things are happening, slowly perhaps, but they are happening, the President thought. Naturally, the press followed close behind. During the walk, the President heard screaming and spotted a man thrashing in the water several yards from the bank. Without hesitating, the President ran out across the water, reached down and lifted the man to safety. All the while, reporters took notes and snapped pictures. The next day's newspaper headlines and talk show hosts proclaimed "Clinton Can't Swim."

Fear. Mistrust. Cynicism. Despair. Apathy. It's a hard cycle to break. Living in a society as stormy as ours it's sometimes easier to retreat to these relatively safe harbors than it is to lend a hand. There is, after all, no risk of failure if you don't try, no chance of disappointment if you're already down on everything or care about nothing, no opportunity to point fingers if you're participating in the solutions. And most importantly, if you choose to be hostile, then you don't have to be compassionate.

But each member of the community can choose to take a risk. We can choose to risk taking responsibility for our individual actions and for those of our community. We can take the risk of showing compassion for our neighbors, to risk reaching out instead of withdrawing behind an indifferent shrug or a cynical sneer.

When we take that risk, we can just as easily win as lose. A religious scholar once said that we're not expected to complete the work in our lifetimes, but neither must we fail to do our part. We must try. If we do nothing else, we must demonstrate for our children that we had the courage to accept

responsibility, to find compassion in our hearts, to take the risk for a better community. If we do this, we will have left them the proper tools to complete the work, or at least carry it on, with conviction and compassion.

We clearly have the power to do this. Our history shows that we are capable of overcoming great adversity and coming back stronger than ever. We have not simply endured, we have thrived. One of the reasons we've been able to do this is because we understand the necessity of compromising, of striking an acceptable balance between the desires of the individual and the needs of society.

We have always found common ground on which to build a sense of community. But we stand to lose what we've built if we allow ourselves to become polarized. There are mighty passions at work in our communities today. We see it all the time, from the debate over abortion rights and gun control, to affirmative action and attempts to criminalize flag burning. But the passions surrounding these issues, and many others, often provoke extreme, sometimes irrational positions. I'm right. You're wrong. Compromise becomes unacceptable.

It's not enough for the get-tough on crime crowd to see a convicted murderer put behind bars for life; they must take their revenge with the death penalty. It's not enough for the members of the National Rifle Association to have hunting rifles excluded from bans on assault weapons; they want access to all weapons, even those with no legitimate sporting use. It's not enough that government spends billions on welfare and job training; it must be done without infringing in any way on a recipient's choices, not even to encourage responsible choices.

In this atmosphere a community can seize up, like a deer frozen in onrushing headlights, and the kind of progress people want comes painfully and much too slowly, if at all.

I suggest that social progress can be achieved most quickly when individuals commit themselves to some very basic and fundamental principles. Listening, genuine listening, is so important to this effort. Listening leads to understanding, understanding to appreciation, appreciation to finding common ground on which we can build community.

Respect is also essential. Compassion and civility demand it. When we disagree we can do so without being disagreeable. We must set ourselves to the task of proving that civility can spread faster than cynicism.

The challenge for all of us is to help break the cycle of despair by restoring a sense of

hopefulness for the future through passionate, and compassionate, community action. We have the obligation to fulfill an important contract -- not a contract on America, but what I call the social contract.

This contract is based on the simple but powerful idea that we respect all people and the individual's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that we help those in need, and that we afford our children the same, or better, opportunities than we had. This should be an iron-clad contract. No escape clauses. No fine print. But we are in the process of breaking the contract, of failing to hold up our end of the intergenerational bargain.

Preserving Proposition 2 1/2, defeating the graduated income tax, cheering politicians who take the no-new-tax pledge, fighting over building new schools, cutting money for higher education -- all these things seem to indicate an unwillingness to invest in our children, in our communities, in our common future.

Those of us who are in our 40s, 50s and 60s today should remember that the teenagers we may be denying a college education because we don't want to pay another cent in taxes, they're the ones we'll expect to pay our pensions. How will they do it? How will they manage when we've spent the last 12 years saddling them with debt? And what will they do now, now that we have a Congress bent on resurrecting the formulas that created most of the debt in the first place? Is it any wonder that many of our young people today feel they've been left holding the bag, and an empty one at that?

The pendulum has swung so far away from this social contract that we are truly in danger of spiritually and financially bankrupting an entire generation. We must stop the pendulum, pull it back to a place where the desires of today are more in balance with the needs of tomorrow. We should find a place in our hearts where we can begin again to show real care and concern for those in need.

And our young people -- the adolescents roaming in gangs, the teenagers hoping for an opportunity, the young adults dreaming of their future and the babies crying in hunger -- must be counted in that number.

We can take a lesson in caring for and helping those in need from Canada geese. When one member of their flock becomes sick or injured during their long flights, two drop out to stay with it until it recovers. Now that's a strong community commitment. Think about that the next time you see a group of two or three geese flying overhead. They helped. They tried. They took the risk. They made the individual commitment to help their fellow goose for the betterment of that individual and their

community. That's the kind of commitment we need to make our communities just as strong.

And we need not look far to find examples of how individuals can change their communities. In the last few years the world has produced several leaders, ordinary people by their own reckoning, who possessed the rare ability to fire and harness the passions of their people and channel them toward the creation of a new, greater society.

An electrician, Lech Walesa, in Poland. A playwright, Vaclav Havel, in the former Czechoslovakia. An attorney, Nelson Mandela, in South Africa. A self-proclaimed homemaker, Corazon Aquino, in the Philippines. A man who challenged the tanks in Moscow, a Georgian by birth, Boris Yeltsin, in Russia. Leadership comes from simple, unexpected places. These leaders, shaped by the circumstances of their society, succeeded in making the transition from despair to hope. But they could not have done it without the passions of their citizens. Whole societies can be reformed only by building a partnership and a sense of community and among all the citizens in the society.

It's not enough for leaders to act like leaders and citizens to be dutiful followers. We can all be leaders in our own way, setting the example for passionate and compassionate community action every day. We must all be in this together or we're not in it all. We should also realize that building community has little to do with money or material possessions. We can't spend our way to optimism. We can't bring our communities back into balance the same way we do a budget. But we can change our attitude. We can smash cynicism with trust. Trust will dissolve the fear and anger. It begins with people trusting in themselves, and then others, and then in the community as a whole.

Even the smallest stone, tossed in the deepest lake, will still send ripples radiating to every shore. When we are willing to risk jumping in and sending out waves of our own, waves of trust, genuine listening, respect, compassion and thoughtful compromise throughout our community, then our problems won't seem quite so defiant. Solutions will indeed seem possible.

All it takes to start moving in a positive direction is the willingness to risk believing in a better way and then acting on that belief. We can believe, until it is otherwise demonstrated, that most businesspeople are charitable, most clergy are trustworthy, most teachers are talented, most attorneys are honorable, and most politicians are, well, all of the above.

We are obligated to find hope in the future and to rebuild our sense of community by finding the common ground. We do this not just for ourselves, but for the sake of our children, who, for the most part, will do as we do, believe as we believe, no matter what we say.