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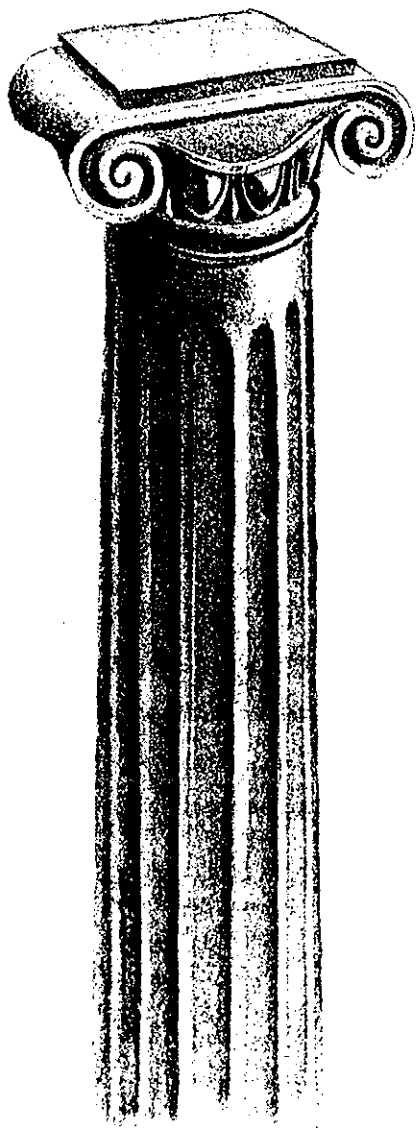
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# The Path to a Civil Society Goes Through the University

By William Damon



TOM HERZBERG FOR THE CHRONICLE

**F**OR MUCH OF THIS DECADE, public intellectuals in the United States have led a chorus of concern over the state of our "civil society." The phrase is evocative and inclusive, alluding both to the quality of our interpersonal relations and to the vitality of our democratic processes. Signs that our civil society is in trouble can be seen in a demise of courtesy in commonplace transactions (angry gestures on the freeways); in a declining commitment to family (the weakening of marriages and too little time spent with children); in a lack of community spirit (neighborhoods where people keep to themselves); in the absence of honor and virtue among public figures (no examples needed here); and in political disengagement across the land (empty voting booths and public cynicism about current affairs).

A recent and eloquent statement of concern about our civil society was published last spring by 24 noted intellectuals, including such scholars as Jean Bethke Elshtain, James Q. Wilson, Cornel West, and William A. Galston. Their report, "A Call to Civil Society," locates the prime threats to our civil life in excessive greed and individualism. It urges a renewed dedication to universal moral truths, a common understanding of the public good, a lived recognition of our interdependence on one another, and a "shared civic faith." Some of that has been said before, but it is well worth saying again, especially in a time of rancorous public and political debate. I know of no better overall summary of our present predicament than the report's initial pages, which sparkle with common sense and sound values.

Yet I found it odd and unsettling how little attention those intellectuals pay to intellectual life or to the institutions of higher education that devote themselves to it. Although higher education is mentioned early in the report as one potential "seedbed of virtue," the final recommendations offer a single paragraph on the subject, which begins with a complaint that higher education often "erodes our sense of common humanity" by disdainful Western culture, fragmenting the student body into narrow interest groups, and questioning the search for truth. The paragraph then calls on universities and colleges to "provide a liberal education," which it leaves undefined.

The cursory nature of the authors' mention of higher education speaks volumes about their lack of faith in its ability to do much to redeem civil society. The implied message is disconcerting, especially given that it comes from a group of distinguished academics.

Where does the report look for solutions? Money is high on the list. Several recommendations focus on economic carrots, such as increasing tax incentives for marriage and for charitable giving, and encouraging employers to grant parental leave. Also prominent are

proposals intended to rein in extreme individualism—for example, laws aimed at discouraging divorce and at controlling the content of movies, television shows, and other media that families perceive as unwholesome for children. Other proposals would abolish state lotteries and gambling, which "purvey a counter-civics ethic of escapism and false hope."

Although the report emphasizes the importance of morality and "a public moral philosophy," for the most part it gives short shrift to *ideas* as a solution for shaping public lives of virtue. One exception is religious thought, which the report stresses may be central to the rediscovery of truth and morality in our disoriented epoch. It is refreshing and welcome to see a recognition of the value of religion in addressing today's social problems. But the report ignores the inquiry and ideas—in philosophy, the humanities, and the sciences—that give contemporary intellectual life much of its moral meaning and excitement. It also ignores the vast amount of scholarly work being done to find areas of moral common ground between scientific and religious truth.

Also troubling is the fact that virtually none of the coverage of the report—in the scholarly press or the general news media—has even mentioned this glaring lack of attention to intellectual life.

When recommendations about human social life play down the importance of ideas, the results can be less than inspiring. The recommendations aimed at curbing wanton individualism convey a "we know what's best for you" attitude that shows little faith in people's ability to think or act rationally. The economic recommendations seem a bit incongruous in a document that complains about our culture's obsession with materialism.

The recommendations aimed at strengthening families and protecting children advance popular biases rather than up-to-date scientific research. For example, the report's assumption that divorce is always bad for children ignores the mass of findings on the harmfulness of continued family conflict. And the report's assumption that parenting is the main determinant of children's values and character disregards the recent scholarship showing how parental influences are mitigated by peers, media, schooling, and other sources of cultural communication. A more-informed view of child development would avoid trying to protect children by imposing a particular family pattern and instead would draw on whatever parental and social resources are available to help children.

Most disappointingly, for a document that starts out in ringing tones, an unnecessary small-mindedness pervades many of its recommendations. Can we really repair the fabric of civil society by abolishing lotteries and sanitizing the content of television shows? Most citi-

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zens would see such acts as smacking of too much social control; they have minds of their own and expect to make their own choices about how to spend their money and time.

**O**N THEIR OWN TURF, in the realm of ideas, intellectuals can, indeed, play a decisive role in redeeming civil society. But that requires a belief in the power of ideas, and not in the power of economic incentives or strict behavioral regulations. As a half-century of research in cognitive and social psychology has shown, ideas are a far more reliable source of motivation for higher human behavior and civic virtue than are sticks, carrots, or social controls.

Studies of people with deep moral commitment have shown that acts of genuine altruism—such as rescuing oppressed people from tyranny and devoting a lifetime to helping the poor—are typically unaccompanied by concerns about economic incentives, risks of punishment, or other personal consequences. Even ordinary moral behavior—habits of honesty, consideration for others, respect for social mores—is sustained in the long run more by understanding and belief than by reward or punishment. People who have faith in the purpose of a law follow it more reliably than those who simply know what will happen to them if they get caught breaking it. And developmental research indicates that high schools, and colleges and universities, have access to young people during precisely the years when understanding and enduring attitudes and beliefs about society are formed.

Educating young minds for civic virtue is acquiring some urgency these days. One of the most disturbing symptoms of our civil society's distress has been the disengagement of young people from such activities as campaigning for social causes or political candidates. Many youths volunteer to do charitable work in their communities on an informal and occasional basis, but that interest is not translating itself into the kind of sustained attention to governance and other formal social systems that characterized prior generations. (I always detect a shock of surprise when I mention that Jean Piaget, Erik H. Erikson, and other developmental psychologists of a generation ago proclaimed that a fascination with formal political ideology was a basic hallmark of intellectual growth among older adolescents.)

Whatever its implications for adolescent identity development, the disengagement of the young from the political process poses a critical problem for any democratic society. Will today's youths be willing to join political parties, sit on juries, run town meetings, or cast ballots in years to come? Without a younger generation

ready and eager to participate, a democratic society has dim prospects.

What must young people learn to participate constructively in civil society? Positive engagement with civic life requires three sets of attributes: First, intellectual abilities such as reasoning skills, literacy, and the knowledge of history and economy required for making informed judgments. Second, moral traits such as dedication to honesty, justice, social responsibility, and the tolerance that makes democratic discourse possible. And finally, practical experience in community organizations, from which young people can learn how to work within groups, in structured settings. If a college education is broadly construed in the liberal tradition, all of those virtues and abilities fall within its domain.

True, colleges and universities have a mixed record of construing liberal education that way. Professors have not always behaved as though making their students into good citizens was a top priority. The attention-grabbing debates over “political correctness” on campuses have been more inward- than outward-looking, revolving around speech codes or the composition of the canon rather than the broader social purposes of instruction. Classic arguments that the educators John Dewey and Robert Maynard Hutchins once joined, over how best to prepare students for democratic citizenship—through direct participation in civic affairs or mastery of great scholarly works that address issues of citizenship—now echo only faintly among the more heated obsessions of today's academic politics.

Yet beneath the surface of news reports that feature eye-catching academic controversies, I see a growing number of initiatives dedicated to preparing students for citizenship in democratic society. They form several distinct genres.

Perhaps the best known are programs—during the academic year or during winter or spring breaks—that send students out to help disadvantaged members of their communities or otherwise contribute to the public good. “Service learning” programs—which let students pursue both academic and social goals—also are widespread; faculty members in many disciplines are finding ways to include students in such activities. Studies have shown that such programs foster academic learning as well as moral and civic commitment in students, particularly when they have a chance to discuss their experiences with peers and adult mentors.

Universities themselves increasingly are taking responsibility for their communities, by helping out in local schools, building playgrounds for children, and sponsoring educational programs and special cultural events for local residents. These projects provide an example for students and opportunities for constructive participation.

Centers for moral and ethical development also have sprung up on many campuses, some to pursue educational research on how to nurture character and virtue in the young, and some to produce curricular materials that can be used in courses at the college level or below. On several campuses, faculty seminars discuss ways in which readings that examine civic virtue can be incorporated into course work in the humanities, social sciences, and even life sciences, where the scientist's obligation to report truthful data and the community's need for socially responsible uses of scientific findings can provide abundant case studies that are authentic, timely, and educational.

Moreover, many colleges and universities are paying increased attention to their honor codes, including written standards for tolerance and academic integrity, as instruments for the civic education of their students. My impression is that campuses are attaching new seriousness to the substance of the codes—what they mean, why they are essential—and to how they are enforced. In some instances, the colleges may ask students to participate in reformulation of the codes; in others, they ask student leaders to explain the codes to other students. When a code is violated, students sit in judgment of their peers, with feedback from academic advisers, the dean's office, and, of course, the student-run newspaper that covers the event. However messy some cases are, the process provides civic preparation for students who observe or take part in it.

**A**LTHOUGH THESE EFFORTS are encouraging, much more needs to be done. Many of the efforts are isolated and minimal, tangential to what the leaders of the institutions consider the real business of education (credentialing, job training, research, alumni relations, a winning sports program). What if these and other attempts to foster civic virtue among students were officially endorsed, widely communicated, integrated into an organized approach, and brought to the center of higher education's mission? What if intellectual leaders such as the authors of “A Call to Civil Society” dedicated themselves to doing that on their own campuses?

That would require bold leadership from administrators and faculty members. Many of us believe that the times demand no less. It also would require faith in the dominion of higher education and in the effectiveness of what scholarship can do best: move young people in the right direction through enlightening and uplifting ideas.

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