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The Changing Status of American Society and a View to the Future

Claire L. Gaudiani

I WANT TO SHARE WITH YOU SOME THOUGHTS in pursuit of democratic civil society because each of us needs to acknowledge our personal responsibility to the future well-being of this democracy. Whether we are in uniform or not, whether we are thirty or fifty or seventy, regardless of gender, race, or national origin, you and I are responsible together for the well-being of an extraordinary dream. To a great extent this dream has already been paid for by people who took it very seriously. Sometimes I feel that members of my own generation fuss too much about how things ought to be, not realizing that in many ways past generations had it much tougher than we do. I will advocate here that we rethink our responsibilities to our democracy, that we re-understand where we are in the struggle to make this democracy work, and that we recommit ourselves with the same energy that our founding fathers used to construct the documents that guide us. That is the same kind of energy that soldiers have expended on battlefields in New England, and from Antietam to foreign shores; they were struggling to preserve this ideal of life in a democratic civil society, and our work needs to be seen in that light.

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Let me begin in an international frame. A few years ago I was flying home from Tokyo, and the person sitting next to me said, in halting English, "Madam, may I ask you a question?"

"Why, of course."

"You are American?"

"Yes, I am."

"I was thinking that your country is full of very different people, from many different parts of the world. You have many different religions, many different races. Tell me, what is it that holds you together as a nation?"

Although I had not realized it until that moment, the answer is so simple. What holds us together is a set of texts. We are a country, I explained to him, that is held together not by our personal ethnic connections but by an idea that we share. I said that Americans have been willing to die for an idea, the idea that is contained in those documents, one of them beginning, "*We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union. . .*," another with the line: "*. . . that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*" You and I know these words, but maybe we don't say them to each other often enough.

I explained to this man that on the block on which I lived in Philadelphia, in the inner city, no two families were of the same race, the same background, the same religion, or the same economic level. We were a city block of Americans. I said to him, "I would cheerfully lay down my life if it were necessary to protect my fellow citizens' rights under the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. I believe that my fellow citizens would do the same thing. That's how we're a country."

"That's very interesting. Are there any other countries that have ever been made like this?"

"We were the first country to be made like this."

It was a provocative experience for me, because I realized that even I—an academic who had been teaching and doing research, working in the academic and corporate sector at the Wharton School, the daughter of a West Pointer who was shot down and put in prison camps at the end of the Second World War—that I myself had not really encountered that truth as deeply as I should have, as a citizen.

Our documents create for us a framework for two important qualities in our democracy: moral coherence and social cohesion. Moral coherence is what we believe together; and what we believe together as citizens is in those documents. Social cohesion is what we do together as citizens about what we believe.

Moral coherence and social cohesion—these two elements play themselves out in three different sectors in a democracy. One is the family, where these

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values are transmitted. Another, farthest from the individual, is the government, where what we believe and what we do about it is worked out in law. But in that great open space between my family and my government is civil society: the welter of associations, organizations, and institutions in which citizens live out their personal and professional lives. It's the Rotary, the Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis, and the Lions; it's the businesses people work for; it's media; it's churches and synagogues; it's bowling leagues and Little Leagues. It's all the places where we do our volunteer work; it's the community foundations; it's the United Way.

Civil society—we take it for granted now in America. But try to find it anywhere else in the world at the same level of health it has in this country. It is very tough to do. France is a great country; it has worked for five hundred years to develop its civil society. But because of the strong organizing power of

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the monarchy, civil society in France had a great deal of trouble, and still does, in shaping and framing relationships. The same is true for Italy and for China.

Civil society is the place where democracy is sustained; what we are experiencing today, I believe, is a destabilization of moral coherence and social cohesion in our civil society. There is no more important work we can do now than address that.

We are about the task of making a modern democratic civil society continue to function in this country. This work began with one of the documents I mentioned, which quickly created the task of “settling ideological space.” In that very early period a war had to be fought for the right to operate with this ideology rather than that of a monarchy; our founding fathers, the Revolutionary War heroes and the New England citizens who gave birth to this democracy even before it had documents, were settlers of what I call ideological space. True, settlers had come to this land before, and they had settled geographical space. Whether they came in Pilgrim ships or slave ships, whether they organized themselves as burgesses or tribal councils, they were settling the geography of this land. The very first pioneers, settling geographical space, were then followed by ideological pioneers, who settled the space defined by the ideology of those documents.

Soon we felt a moral coherence around those words I spoke to you, but people began to see a disconnect between those words and slavery. The abolitionists arose, and the nineteenth century was marked by the bitter Civil War. It moved us forward in the political framework to assure that our ideology

was going to live in the law—because when those words were written, they were a goal, not yet the law. The third wave of pioneers, then, were the settlers of *political* space. The Civil War was fought, and it was followed by the efforts of the suffragists to bring women “to the table” as full citizens.

Many years later, in the early sixties we did another major piece of work. It was not only truly to welcome our African-American brothers and sisters and people of color to the professions, to graduate schools, to medical, law, and business schools, into the armed services in larger numbers, and, very importantly, to the ranks of extended opportunity. That struggle was still to make the political framework sustain the ideology. We were finishing the settling of political space, which meant getting “all men are created equal” to mean *all* men and women, of all colors, whether or not they are property owners, regardless of their religion—and all participating in democratic civil society. The political “table” is not flawless yet, but consider: before the law, disabled people are there too.

I would say to you that the next task is just now before us. The political work of settling our ideological space has been done. Our work as citizens right now is to settle *psychological* and *social* space in civil society. We have to figure out what to do, now that everybody is at the table. What kind of expectations can we have of each other? What kinds of guarantors can we be of each other's rights? What kind of practitioners of civic virtues do we have to be?

In our democracy we have a social contract, and the social contract is built on two pillars. One is the pillar of rights, and the other is the pillar of virtues. We have no rights that are not attached to civic virtues. My right to free speech, when I am a minority of one, is dependent on your willingness to practice the civic virtue of tolerance; if you decide, as a majority, not to practice it, you can pass laws that deny me free speech. All my rights in the whole Bill of Rights are linked to your willingness as a majority to practice the civic virtues. When I stand with you in the majority and someone else is the minority of one, you need to know that you can count on my tolerance, charity, integrity, and honesty—the civic virtues that Jefferson and Franklin wrote about. You need to know that I will practice them just as vigorously as you in order to defend the rights of another of our brothers and sisters.

We are each the guarantor of each other's rights. It is not the government that sustains our rights. It is We the People, it is civil society. Our families might defend us whether we are right or wrong, but in civil society the rights that we are assured come from the guarantee of fellow citizens to practice civic virtues. I say rights and virtues, not “rights and duties” or “rights and responsibilities”; responsibilities and duties are what we do after we know we are guarantors, practitioners of civic virtue: we become tolerant, charitable, frugal, and honest. We call ourselves to *be*, and out of that being comes the commitment to *doing*.

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This is the relationship between moral coherence and social cohesion: being and doing. This social contract among citizens in civil society and in democracy is all that will sustain us. If we sustain that, it is all we will need.

But the rest of the world is looking at us. What song were they singing in Tienanmen Square—do you know? What song were they singing when the Wall came down in Berlin? What song were they singing that night in front of the Russian White House when four young people were killed? They were singing “We Shall Overcome”—yes, they were singing our song. They were thinking not just about what we have in this extraordinarily wealthy country, not just what we can do with what we have; they were thinking about who we are. They want to overcome what they are struggling with. They know we have had a fight, a struggle, and they are willing to align themselves with that struggle.

We know very well we have not got it right yet, that it is not perfect here; our cities, our suburbs, our young and our old know the struggles we have had. We know that since Watergate particularly we have had a series of disappointments at the ethical level, from leaders in all ranges of responsibilities. Whether it be Ivan Boesky and his colleagues on Wall Street, or college presidents, or members of the clergy or the military or politicians, none of us who breaks the civic virtues does it in isolation. High technology gives us information about each other. We fracture something critical in the trust that members of civil society should share. Democracy is in danger every time civil society is hurt like that.

We have struggled with modernism; we have struggled with restructuring corporations, where people with long-standing expectations for continuous employment have been shuffled and “downsized.” We have watched a proliferation of well-meaning laws, rules, and regulations; we have perhaps abused law

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as some people abuse rights. We have also abused law by forgetting that not everything can be legislated: we try to make the law make us ethical when there is an extraordinary difference between what is legal and what is ethical and moral. We have seen the rise of drugs and violence and the disintegration of the family. Modern society and the strong organizing, systematizing forces that have made things so very efficient have taken us away from spending time with each other in civil society, in some cases even inside the family.

We have had our difficulties, these last thirty years. As I talk about reinvigorating civil society, do not think for a moment that I don’t understand this. Yet

this great economy, this great military, and the profound idea of democracy have brought us to a moment when all over the world people want something like what they see here: the right to vote, a civil society, a free and open market, and opportunity for one's children.

I believe that the task before us now in settling psychological and social space can be done if we understand that we must balance the strong forces of modernism with some of the forces of *pre-modernism*. Francis Fukuyama defines modernism as the efficiency that optimizes, systematizes, and rationalizes structures that organize modern life.¹ These forces have given us an enormous power in the world and in our own country. But they have perhaps reached the end-point of their ability to contribute to the making and remaking of America unless they are augmented by certain forces which Fukuyama calls "pre-modern," which organized and structured human society before the Enlightenment. In general, these are structures that are built on faithful relationships, long-lasting relationships. The guild system, where a person went through apprenticeship and journeyman levels and then on to be a master, is an example of such a structuring force, one that worked very well and in certain areas continues to organize expertise.

Today we have "expert systems" on our computers, and we make people experts in many different ways. But we need in civil society to remember the importance of relationships. While it goes without saying that no pre-modern society gave people the opportunities to express their individual giftedness with the security that a modern democracy does, we have become so busy that we cannot spend much time in faithful relationships.

Institutions of higher education traditionally use a number of pre-modern organizing principles; colleges and universities are a model of connections between modern and pre-modern life. You have seen academic processions, dressed in brightly colored, funny outfits that have been worn in higher education for about a thousand years: they are an outward sign of the inward grace of those longstanding relationships. Young faculty start out as graduate students, apprenticed to graduate faculty; then they go on to their first jobs, where they become journeymen. When they present themselves for tenure, if they are accepted by the senior faculty they become masters—just like the old system. We tend to choose our academic leaders, our presidents, from the faculty, so that we are led by a "family member," who has a longstanding, faithful relationship to the institution.

Robert Putnam has argued that our busy-ness weakens democracy. In *Making Democracy Work* he urges us to look at our schedules and decide, quite purposefully, to strengthen democracy by setting aside time for rebuilding civil society through personal involvement in faithful relationships.²

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I challenge my colleagues in higher education to be much more explicit models of this synergy between modernism and pre-modernism, because to have all races, both genders, different national origins, and different levels of physical ability and economic achievement work well together means that we have to spend time together. We need to understand what our African-American brothers were saying when they went to the Million Man March. We need to understand the frustration of people like the African-American computer analyst who recently said, "Sometimes I feel foolish. I was here as a boy, listening to Martin Luther King call for a time when all little children would be valued together. I've lived that dream, but [my experience does not] define the mind of America about African American men." This is a moment for us to say, "I should have been there to know him. He should have been able to tell me at the Rotary or at a bowling team meet. I should have been able to understand, so I could have told others." Things should have changed before that man felt trivialized by the commitment he made to an ideal that we summoned him to, one that those documents and 220 years of ideological and political struggle have called him to accept as a personal responsibility.

"Our great-grandchildren could say, 'You were wrong! Couldn't you see what was happening in the late nineties? Didn't you understand that you had a chance. . . ?' What will we tell them?"

You and I as Americans have to "own" the experience of our brothers and sisters: whether they be African-Americans, or descendants of people who came over on the *Mayflower*, or those who arrived five or ten or fifteen years ago. We are one people, with an ideology that connects us. That dream has been moved along at great sacrifice for a long time. There is no reason why our own experience as pioneers should be easier than that of the pioneers who struck out to settle this land; why our time should be easier than that of those who struggled through the Revolutionary War and the rise of this country, or the days of abolition and the Civil War, or through the century and decades since then? Why should our time be easier? Why are we amazed that we have struggles?

You and I celebrate that in our country we have done a great deal and that we can hear each other. All that stops us from achieving a new level of interaction in this rich civil society is making time for each other. The time we spend with each other, trying to understand each other's needs and each other's children's hopes, will be like that which other pioneers had. We will be settling, making comfortable life happen, in the social space that democracy offers us. We will be settling psychological space.

It has not been easy for men to make space for women in many of the professions. We've had to remind you from time to time when things have been disappointing. But almost fifty percent of the graduate, medical, law, and business school students this year are women. That is an extraordinary change in a period of thirty or thirty-five years; it wasn't true when I graduated in 1966. So we have been settling psychological space at the boardroom table, at the operating table, at the meeting and conference room table. We are getting better at it, though there are mistakes. We need to spend time settling psychological and social space so that civil society in this democracy can continue to flourish.

I want to conclude with Robert Putnam's recent study of the rise of democracy in Italy. He began his research with the assumption that the wealthy provinces developed strong civil society, democratic principles, the arts, humanities, education, research, and technology—and so built the Renaissance. That sounds right: if you have the wealth, you can do these things, because you are not scrabbling for everyday existence. But the evidence showed him that it is wrong. It was the provinces that developed strong civil society which produced wealth, and out of that wealth came the universities, the arts, research, and technology. These provinces developed strong civil society, firm trust, and faithful relationships outside the family *and* outside the government. The place where civil society got strong was among the citizens, and the provinces where that happened became wealthy.

Now, you as an American might say, "We're not in Italy—this country has always had a strong civil society—none of that has anything to do with us." But what if you are wrong? What if we let civil society weaken and we stop caring? Will we need higher walls, more guards? We can do that—but for how long? And what kind of a democracy would we become? Fifty years from now our great-grandchildren could say, "You were wrong! Couldn't you see what was happening in the late nineties? Didn't you understand that you had a chance? You saw militias putting themselves together, and people who felt that they couldn't be heard and were distrustful of their government and each other. You saw wealthy people shutting themselves off into more exclusive communities, not engaging. What were you thinking about?" What will we tell them?

I think we cannot take a chance. We cannot just keep building a bigger economy and hope it doesn't matter whether we sustain civil society. When recently the citizens of Orange County, California, voted to default on their municipal bond debt, I saw that something important is happening in my country. It is not just happening in the ghetto, not just with people who are shooting-up drugs—it is happening with people who have options. They have lost the moral attachment to the civic virtue of honesty. If we abandon common commitment to debt repayment, what do we think will happen to a capital market economy? Are we losing moral coherence? I think so.

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When I talk about civic virtue, am I an academic with her head in the clouds? Maybe, but maybe not. Maybe these old-fashioned civic virtues are a piece of what we need, all of us, in this great democracy: because our prosperity depends on the strength of our moral coherence and social cohesion. Indeed, our "job description" as citizens who have the privilege of living in America is to contribute to the civil society upon which our 220-year experiment in self-government rests.

Notes

1. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).
2. Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994).

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