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Interview with Jill Long Thompson, Ph.D.

Elizabeth Gingerich
elizabeth.gingerich@valpo.edu

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Interview and Discussion

JILL LONG THOMPSON

June 9, 2020 Argos, Indiana, USA

— by Elizabeth F. R. Gingerich



Q: Firstly, congratulations on your new book, *The Character of American Democracy*. Is this your first?

This is my first book. I have done quite a bit of writing in my work in academia and public service, but this is my first and I think my last book.

Q: Why your last?

It's tiring.

Q: When did you begin writing?

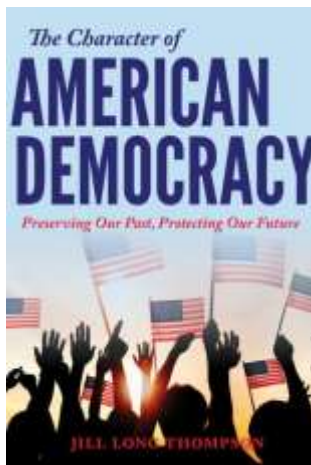
As I recall, I started this in 2017 and I think I finished it in the late fall of 2018.

Q: Actually, that didn't take long!

It seemed like it!

Q: What was the precipitating factor that motivated you to write this book?

Well, I have always felt that professional ethics are integrally tied to democracy and I also believe to a strong capitalist economy. And I realized that, as I listened to some politicians and to some in the public, respond to unethical behavior on the part of politicians that there really was not a clear understanding of the role that ethics play in democracy. And if you don't have an ethical democracy, you don't have democracy because unethical behavior significantly undermines the democratic process, as well as who we are as a nation. And I decided that there was a need for a book that simply and directly makes that point.



Q: Did you have any allies in this process?

I am very blessed to have many allies. I'm talking to one right now. And family and friends with whom I have worked over the years as well as about half a dozen people who had worked with me in public office. I asked them to review my initial draft and several of them responded, "I want you to finish what you have started so I can read the rest!"

Q: And what part did Rep. John Lewis and Leon Panetta play in the launch of this book?

Well, they are very ethical gentlemen and they have demonstrated throughout their careers, their time in public service as well as personally, that integrity is critical to leadership and it is critical to democracy. And they have been friends since I served in Congress. I reached out and asked them if they would be willing to read the book and provide a statement and they very kindly did so.

Q: Would you say that integrity and ethics are integral to the character of American democracy? And since we're seeing a paucity of both from the White House right now, does that mean that our democracy is under attack?

I do believe that our democracy is at risk, as well as our leadership role in the world. Not just our moral leadership, but our strategic leadership is at risk.

Q: Why strategic leadership?

If we don't have intellectual integrity, we can't have good strategic leadership. Integrity applies to a variety of situations. Personal integrity, for example, is another. Intellectual integrity is critical to good policy making because when we make decisions that are not based on fact, but are based on a desire to control and to make political gains, that undercuts our strength.

Q: So, would you say that pursuit of higher education is necessary for all American citizens in order to gain that requisite knowledge of fact?

I believe that life-long learning is critical to a democratic society. I learn things every day that I simply did not know the day before. And I'll never know a fraction – not even a small fraction – of what I would like to know. But if we can improve information literacy in this age of technology, we can make great strides in leadership here, but also in leadership globally. I think information literacy is one of the greatest challenges that we face. When we don't have the information literacy that we need across the population, we don't make the best decisions in a world that has become more complex. When I first voted in 1972, international trade was a much smaller percentage of overall trade; international relationships were important but not to the extent they are today. Even jobs that people hold are more complex today. I remember one time going to McDonald's and their computer system was not working. They couldn't function. That reflects a level of complexity that did not exist thirty or forty years ago. And at a time when decision-making requires more and better information, information literacy is critical.

Q: So, in that vein, do you believe that colleges are important?

I do believe that higher education is very important.

Q: Do you believe that college should be free?

I am not an advocate of free college, but I am 100% behind affordable college. And I think it is critical that we make college affordable for every student who wants to go to college and is willing to put forth the effort to earn the degree. And I say that from personal experience. I had both a National Defense Student Loan and an academic scholarship at Valparaiso University and that made it possible for me to go to college. And then when I went on to graduate school, at Indiana University, I was able to have my tuition covered by working in the business placement office and later in the doctoral program, by teaching as an associate instructor. That made it affordable.

Q: Education and healthcare are typically symbiotically related: it is difficult to be a lifelong learner and not be healthy in the process. Without good health, one certainly can't be productive nor subscribe to an educational regimen. Many democratic socialist nations – including Scandinavian countries, France, Germany, and Italy – have treated these two areas as a right. Is it possible to do something like that in this country?

I think the model that the United States needs to develop would be one that is workable for a very large and diverse population. Quite frankly I have concerns about an exclusive centralized health care system because I worry about what would happen if a very conservative president and Congress were to be elected and decided that they were going to restrict coverage based

upon what they decide is morally acceptable. For example, women's health and a woman's right to choose.

Q: So, you're saying if healthcare were centralized, under that hypothetical, the concern is that a conservative president could, with one stroke of the pen, sign an executive order and just basically eliminate that element of women's health? Is that the concern?

Yes. But I also believe that there are efficiencies in a market economy. And I believe strongly in incentives for healthy living. I think a system that combines government-supported/ public healthcare and private sector healthcare would be the best approach.

Q: So, you would endorse a partnership of the two to provide services and ensure nationwide coverage?

Yes.

Q: I know that you wrote this book pre-Covid. So, would you still support this type of private-public partnership even though the virus has disproportionately impacted communities of color who are, in many instances, least able to financially shoulder its consequences?

We are also seeing the private sector work with the government sector to address this crisis. Lilly (pharmaceuticals) for example, is moving very rapidly on the development of an antibody treatment.

Q: But so is the University of Oxford – in a country with nationalized healthcare?

Yes. Both the public and private sectors are making a contribution.



Q: I believe the administration has pledged one billion dollars to that entity?

I think that a balanced partnership is what works best.

Q: In the face of the virus, there have been more calls to extend Obamacare coverage but instead we're seeing a retraction due to current administration policies. Would that still be considered part of this partnership?

Oh yes! And I think that it's also important to recognize that if you were to shift from the private sector to an exclusively public sector, that would have a huge impact on the economy.

Q: How so?

You would, over a very short period of time, eliminate certain jobs. Over time other jobs may be created in the public sector, but the transition would, I think, be very disruptive.

Q: But haven't we experienced a radical type of transition in the past? For instance, we moved from horse-and-buggy to combustion vehicles to electric vehicles and now we are transitioning from traditional energy grids to renewables? I know that just yesterday BP announced the elimination of 10000 jobs worldwide due to less oil demand. But you're also seeing elevated hiring levels in the renewable energy sector. It might be disruptive, but don't you believe that certain changes warrant disruption?

But we would still be moving into a centralized government program that would be running an industry, which would reduce, and in some cases eliminate, the incentives that lead to innovation and opportunity.

Q: Isn't there that cross over anyway, for instance between private sector healthcare insurance and Medicaid? As it stands the private and public health care sectors working together? Isn't there this overlap already?

We do, and having served in Congress, I have seen firsthand how some who serve in public office want to impose their personal religious and moral beliefs on the public. I think that often times people look at a centralized or socialized system as a simple answer to a much larger and more complex problem. I think there is value in a market economy, as well as value in well-designed and administered public programs.

Q: In studying leaders worldwide, there appears to be a solid track record of many female heads of state and government with respect to implementing progressive energy policies and effective Covid-control measures. In fact, a recent 2020 *Forbes* article points to female leadership throughout the world as a marker for effective policymaking, especially in the time of managing Covid. This appears to be evident in New Zealand, Iceland, Norway, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Taiwan, and Singapore and now, in light of your own record, in the area of ethics especially, do you see that there is in advantage overall with female leadership in government?



This appears to be evident in New Zealand, Iceland, Norway, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Taiwan, and Singapore and now, in light of your own record, in the area of ethics especially, do you see that there is in advantage overall with female leadership in government?

I think that there is an advantage in diversity. Research shows over and over that when you have leadership that is comprised of different people who come from different backgrounds and experiences, that's when

you get the best decision making, whether its corporate, government, or not-for-profit. Diversity leads to better decisions.

Q: However, there is not much diversity in these countries I just named – largely homogeneous populations?

But, there is benefit to gender diversity, as well as racial and ethnic diversity.

Q: True – in many of these governments, there has been a quota system to ensure diverse and equal representation. And with respect to New Zealand’s Prime Minister – Jacinda Ardern has been characterized as someone who really listens to the public, is empathetic, and who grounds her decisions in fact and science. You explain the innerworkings of capitalism, integrity, and ethics in the book so where does empathy stand in relationship to a sound democratic government?

Empathy, I believe, is very consistent with moral imagination, which is the ability to understand others with whom we don’t share common experiences. And that leads to better decision-making and there’s research that shows that, as well. The development of social capital for both individuals and organizations helps them perform better at their jobs and perform better as an organization. And much of that comes from empathy ... from having moral imagination. Moral imagination is often misunderstood as imagining something as moral, but it actually refers to having empathy or an ability to care about others.

Q: It’s ironic you say that because I was listening a couple nights ago to Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) during commentary on a new anti-lynching bill introduced in the Senate. She said that her friends have communicated with her about her lack of action in the face of race relations and policing reforms. She said in speaking with their friends, Senators Cory Booker and Kamala Harris, she realized the fact of white privilege. She realized that she had not lived their lives and that she needed to become more empathetic. Other Republicans seem to live or have left a legacy marked by empathy – Senator Mitt Romney and former Senator Richard Lugar to name a few (who actually wrote the inaugural letter to the *Journal of Values-Based Leadership*). But in a broader sense, would you say that you are seeing a change in today’s GOP?

I think that the Republican Party has changed dramatically and it started in the Newt Gingrich era where the focus was on elections rather than sound policy. I think it really manifested itself in something very counter to what we stand for in democracy when President Trump was elected. I think his presidency is a reflection of things that have happened in the country, rather than simply being a reflection of him.

Q: An accelerant?

An accelerant.

Q: With education, and the need for active citizenship and for everyone to be informed, what do you say about *Fox News* as a conduit to convey reliable information?

I think that there is a place in journalism for conservative and liberal and moderate presentation of facts. In other words, there is a place for analysis of facts, but there is not a place for untruths.

Q: Not a place for untruths?

Yes. There is not a place for untruths.

Q: And Fox News has been labeled by many as a perpetrator of untruths, has it not? Do you think Fox News is channeling misinformation?

I think the mission of Fox News is to promote a particular ideology rather than to report the news. And I believe much of that ideology is contrary to the character of American democracy. I also believe that any time you have individuals with the title of news anchor or news reporter espousing ideology that is not consistent with the Constitution of our country, then there is potential for undermining American democracy.

Q: When you see the peaceful protests in Lafayette Park across from the White House a couple weeks ago, with a certain level of paramilitary presence used to disperse the crowds, do you have any fear for our democracy? Could this be an undermining of the US Constitution?



I think that oftentimes the cost of this type of action can be severe.

Q: Here at your farm in Argos, Indiana, am I right to surmise that this is a Republican stronghold? If so, how is it that you were raised a Democrat? I believe you mentioned in the book that your parents were both Democrats?

My dad was a Democratic precinct committee man and I was out registering voters with my mom when I was 6. I remember that she volunteered for the Democratic Party — while she would only register Democrats, she would provide information to anybody who asked about where and how they could register to vote.

Q: Why were your parents in the Democratic Party, especially living in a predominantly Republican section of the country?

Well, at that time, it was much more balanced. One of the reasons we were out registering voters in 1958 was that we wanted to help a neighbor get elected county sheriff and he won. But I also think that the Democratic Party recognizes the complexity of the issues and we know that complex problems usually cannot be solved with a simple one-line answer. My parents have always understood that.

Q: Like “Defund the Police”?

De-militarize. This is what the goal should be. But I found the Democratic Party to be more thoughtful, and the values are very consistent with what I think the founding fathers had in mind when they wrote the Constitution.

Q: But were the founding fathers not slave owners?

Of course, that was wrong.

Q: But when we look at morals and ethics across-the-board, was there a natural deficiency with the founding fathers and hence then with the documents they produced?



That is why we have had constitutional amendments to correct what was allowed in the original document. Correcting wrongs always seems to take longer than it should, which is why we must stay active and never give up.

Q: Like the 13th and 14th Amendments which you reference multiple times in the book. I believe, you are for an equal opportunity type of capitalism? Do you think that we are way past Jim Crow and abiding by equal opportunities for all?

Oh, I think we have a long way to go.

Q: What do we need to do?

I do not think there is one simple answer but we need to ensure that everybody, regardless of background and economic status, has an education. In the State of Indiana, that means we

need to get rid of vouchers that are draining too much money from the public schools and turning it over into the hands of people who are trying to make money off of the educational system.

Q: Should private schools be closed?

I think that private schools are great. But I think vouchers that drain money from public school systems should be eliminated.

Q: Would you say that public schools in the State of Indiana are in a crisis mode? Even pre-Covid?

I think that we are in a serious time ... and we need to change direction.

Q: Off the cuff, if Vice President Joe Biden wins in November, would you consider being tapped for secretary for the Department of Education?

I would be honored to be asked to serve in a Biden administration. I respect him a great deal. And I believe he has both the understanding and the ability to correct the wrongs that have occurred under this administration.

Q: You worked under two democratic administrations: Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. Do you think that they held up constitutional ideals?

Oh, they are very committed to constitutional ideals and they both understand democracy. They ran for public office because they believe in the country they served.

Q: How would you say that they believed in the country? Could you be more specific?

They believe in the values of what is the greatest democratic experiment in the history of the world. They both understand that democracy is not just about the policies that get developed but it's also about how we develop the policies. And how we listen to everyone. They were both and still are so good at bringing together people who have different points of view and figuring out how to find workable solutions. And one of the problems in democracy that you see on both the right and the left is that you have people who think that they have to have their way and that it is wrong to compromise. But democracy is built on compromise. You don't compromise constitutional values but you have to compromise on the specific form that the policy takes.

Q: Shortly after his inauguration, Barack Obama stated reflectively that he was the president of *all* Americans. But what have seen over the last several years is a president only serving his base. Would you say that this was a major dichotomy between the two styles of leadership?

There was a huge difference in how President Obama and President Clinton served versus how President Trump tries to run things.

Q: And presently?

It's very unnerving. It is.

Q: In comparing your book to other contemporary writings, I would like to reference Ian Bassin, the executive director of *Protect Democracy*. Bassin cites an “elephant graph” which shows growing wealth disparities in this country – part of the reason for America’s democratic decline. But he cautions that finance only tells part of the story as other factors indicate a threat to democracies around the world. He notes how democracy has been distorted by such

things like climate change, migration, globalization, tribalism, the rise of social media, Russian interference, and partisan gerrymandering. The cumulative effect has been to fuel skepticism about the functioning of American democracy. Worldwide we are seeing other threats to a democratic system of governing. India currently is facing institutionalized discrimination directed toward its Muslim population and Brazilian president Bolsonaro has silenced the country's own health department and the press overall concerning Covid-related cases and deaths. Is this a downward trend anticipated to only accelerate?

I think it is a troubling trend which will not be resolved with one election. And because it is a trend globally, the role of the United States in correcting it is as important now as any other time in history. It is as important as our role in World War II, for example, and it is very important that we have leadership in this country that understands democratic principles and understands how ethics and integrity fit in democracy.

Q: World leadership seems to be an oxymoronic ideal with the nationalism and isolationist policies rendered so far. Would you agree that President Trump has isolated us?

I think that he simply does not appreciate the role that the United States needs to play. Not only does he fail to understand the role of the presidency, he appears not to even care. It appears that he ran for office for personal gain rather than to lead what is, again, the greatest democratic experiment in the history of the world. His time in office makes it clear that democracy is fragile. And when the voters fail to put enough time into learning the issues, studying the issues, and studying the backgrounds of the candidates, this failure puts us all at risk. It puts this country at risk.

Q: I believe that is what General Kelly recently intimated – we as voters need to study the backgrounds, and intent of, our candidates. And without that, we are simply not informed. And if you are not informed, you are not an active citizen. And without active citizenry, you have a demise of democracy? Is that a logical conclusion?

Yes. An informed citizenry who upholds the values of democracy is important to the democracy's success ... and even to its continuation.

Q: And would you say that other distortions like partisan gerrymandering, uncurbed influence by third party actors and countries, migration, and globalism are undermining democracies worldwide? Are you seeing those on the rise right now?

Globalization and technology contribute to a more complex environment that makes it more challenging to make the right decisions as a citizen. And it also can make it more difficult to fight election interference by an adversary who uses technology to do so. An adversary can hack into a Facebook account or falsify who they are on Facebook and widely distribute information. And research shows that false information is distributed more widely and more rapidly than factual information. It is probably more entertaining and more interesting and that is why I'm going to repeat that we have a responsibility to develop information literacy.

Q: Also, in the recent past our leaders have negotiated in this complex world some of these problems – with Iran, nuclear capabilities (leading to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action JCPOA) – and with the world, tackling climate change. But then the current president has

withdrawn from both, essentially breaching trust. How can we ever rebuild that trust worldwide?

I think it is important to recognize that globalization and technology and other developments that have increased the complexity of our environment are not unique to the United States. They exist all around the world. And there is no question that there are many around the world who would like the United States to be the kind of leader it has historically been. I think a change in the presidency is needed. Vice President Biden would restore our role as a world leader of character. He has both the commitment to our democracy and the understanding of issues. I think a change in leadership would send a strong message around the world.



Q: What if Trump wins re-election?

I think that that would be a real challenge for the United States and for the world.

Q: How so?

We would see more of what we have seen, but on steroids. Going back to the role that the United States has played in the world, I want to use the Marshall Plan after World War II as an example. The idea that you can take your ball and go home and somehow be a winner is very baffling to me. How could anyone even think that that works? You cannot win a ball game if you are not on the court or on the field. You can't. You can't win a gold medal at the Olympics if you don't compete. And most of us realize that we have to work with people to get along. This approach of pulling out of international organizations - pulling out of the World Health Organization, for example - just makes an official look very childish and uninformed.

Q: I was in Iceland during the 2018 Helsinki Conference where Putin and Trump fielded questions. That conference was broadcast in the lobby of our hotel and I was the only American. When our president disavowed our own intelligence communities in favor of Vladimir Putin many asked me if I thought Trump would be forced to resign because of those statements. Of course, nothing happened. It now seems that we are not just disfavored, we have become the laughing stock of so much of the world. Do you see that as well?

Remember when he was speaking at the United Nations and they laughed? That is not a show of strength by the United States.

Q: Strength for this White House seems to be breaking up peaceful protesters by militarized police so he could hold up a Bible. Isn't it moral strength that we need? One of points made in *The Character of American Democracy*, is that yes, democracy is under attack but, when

you see protesters every single day – not just in major metropolitan centers but in Ipswich Utah – is that not a good sign that democracy is cherished?

Yes, I'm actually beginning to feel optimistic.

Q: Why are you optimistic and does your book reflect this optimism?

I am optimistic for a couple of reasons. I have been teaching students who have demonstrated that they understand what democracy is and that they have values and a commitment to a career that will be consistent with a democratic system. But I am also optimistic because the public has responded. Occurrences over the past several months - including a recognition that President Trump has not effectively handled the Coronavirus pandemic in large part because he has not been honest about it – are now resonating with the public. But, I am even more encouraged by the young people who have said, “Enough is enough!” Regarding police brutality – most police officers do not engage in those kinds of horrible acts. But, it should never happen. And an assault on anyone must be recognized as an assault on all of us, because we are all brothers and sisters in democracy. It does appear to me that we are finally being more honest as a nation about how unfairly we treat minorities. And I honestly believe that people – and some of this comes from scientific research – now realize that we are all more similar than we are different. And we need to look at people’s hearts and not the color of their skin.

Q: That same statement was made by Barack Obama, by the way, after concluding his 2nd administration. He said that after all of those years of service and travels around the world what he discovered was that we are more all the same than anything else.

Yes, we are!



Q: And then your emphasis on honesty is basically evidenced by General Colin Powell recently.

We have a problem if we don't tell the truth about what it is. The example I use in the classroom is about ice cream. If I am not honest with myself and about how much ice cream I eat, my clothes won't fit!

Q: Everyone must own up to his or her part.

Yes! You cannot discriminate against someone else without undermining who we are as a people and as a nation. You cannot. And if you lie to yourself, you are getting in the way of progress and solving problems. And that's why ethics are so important. We must have integrity in leadership.

Q: Your book keys in on self-reflection. In order to diagnose a problem, you cannot disassociate yourself from it. You're either part of the solution or part of the problem.

Yes!

Q: So back to the current protests. Why do you believe that the death of George Floyd might be igniting something new that Michael Brown's and Eric Garner's deaths never did?

I think that the video of how he died really opened a lot of people's eyes.

Q: But didn't we see that with Eric Garner though, right?

There has been a frustration that has been building for a number of years and having a president who does not acknowledge the problem and who has not been honest about the problem, I think has led people to finally say we need to take action because leadership in Washington will not.

Q: Do you think that after 3 years of misinformation and the dissemination of conspiracy theories have resulted in more and more people questioning what is happening?

I believe there has been something of an awakening, I know we all have unconscious biases and we see them in other people more easily than we see them in ourselves. But I think that watching the president's response to the killing of George Floyd, there were probably some people who said my gosh, I know people like that, and I'm not going to stand for it anymore.

