How America Can Rediscover Itself

From “A Really Good Thing Happening in America” by David Brooks in The New York Times, 10/8:

“A strategy for community problem-solving does an extraordinary job at restoring our social fabric.”

“No long ago, in Spartanburg, S.C., I visited the offices of something called the Spartanburg Academic Movement (SAM).”

“The walls were lined with charts measuring things like kindergarten readiness, third-grade reading scores and post-secondary enrollment.”

“Around the table was just about anybody in town who might touch a child’s life. There were school superintendents and principals, but there were also the heads of the Chamber of Commerce and the local United Way, the police chief, a former mayor and the newspaper editor.”

“The people at SAM track everything they can measure about Spartanburg’s young people from cradle to career. They gather everybody who might have any influence upon this data—parents, religious leaders, doctors, nutrition experts, etc.”

“And then together, as a communitywide system, they ask questions: Where are children falling off track? Why? What assets do we have in our system that can be applied to this problem? How can we work together to apply those assets?”

“There are a lot of things I love about this approach.”

“First, it understands that life is longitudinal. Sometimes social policies are distorted by the tyranny of randomized controlled experiments. Everybody is looking for the one magic intervention that will have a measurable effect.”

“But life isn’t like that. Our actual lives are influenced by millions of events that interact in mysterious ways. And when life is going well it’s because dozens of influences are flowing together and reinforcing one another. SAM tries to harness those dozens of influences.”

“Second, SAM treats the whole person. ‘The disease of modern character is specialization,’ Wendell Berry once wrote. Sometimes schools treat students as brains on a stick who come to be filled with skills and information.”

“But children don’t leave behind their emotions, their diet, their traumas, their safety fears, their dental problems and so on when they get to school. If you’re going to help kids, you have to help the whole kid all at once.”

“Discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.” - Susan David
“Third, and maybe most important, SAM embodies a new civic architecture, which has become known as the ‘collective impact’ approach. Americans feel alienated from and distrustful toward most structures of authority these days, but this is one they can have faith in.”

“SAM organizes the community of Spartanburg around a common project. Then it creates an informal authority structure that transcends public-sector/private-sector lines, that rallies cops and churches, the grass roots and the grass tops. Members put data in the center and use it as a tool not for competition but for collaboration. Like the best social service organizations, it is high on empathy and high on engineering. It is local, participatory and comprehensive.”

“SAM is not a lone case. Spartanburg is one of 70 communities around the country that use what is called the StriveTogether method. StriveTogether began in Cincinnati just over a decade ago. A few leaders were trying to improve education in the city and thinking of starting another program. But a Procter & Gamble executive observed, ‘We’re program-rich, but system-poor.’ In other words, Cincinnati had plenty of programs. What it lacked was an effective system to coordinate them.”

“A methodology was born: organize around the data, focus on the assets of the community, not the deficits; realize there is no one silver-bullet solution; create a ‘backbone organization’ that can bring all the players together; coordinate decision-making and action; share accountability.”

“At one point the folks in Cincinnati noticed that their students were not coming prepared for kindergarten. The data suggested that the private pre-K programs were performing better than the public ones. So the public school system allocated some of its money to support other, private programs, making Cincinnati one of the first American cities to offer near-universal preschool. That’s a community working as one.”

“Collective impact structures got their name in 2011, when John Kania and Mark Kramer wrote an influential essay for the Stanford Social Innovation Review in which they cited StriveTogether and provided the philosophical and theoretical basis for this kind of approach.”

“Such structures are now being used to address homelessness, hunger, river cleanup and many other social ills. Collective impact approaches have had their critics over the years, in part for putting too much emphasis on local elites and not enough on regular parents (which is fair).”

“Building working relationships across a community is an intrinsically good thing. You do enough intrinsically good things and lives will be improved in ways you can never plan or predict. This is where our national renewal will come from.”

Rural as Incubator/Innovator for Cooperation

From a blog post “What Rural America Can Teach Us About Civil Society,” by Allen Smart and Betsey Russell at Campbell University, 8/21/18:

“In their quest to cultivate a renewed sense of civil society, Americans often look to urban areas for examples of what is and isn’t working in terms of bridging divides and bringing people together. This makes sense, since approximately 80 percent of us live in urban areas. Many also point to a perceived rift between urban and rural as a bright line of division in our country, which poses a threat to our civil society writ large.”

“There is a popular, longstanding perception that rural America is somehow separate from the rest of us—either by choice or ineptitude. Studies by the Frame-works Institute have shown that most non-rural dwellers perceive rural America as either one large, poorly

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educated and impoverished backwater (a rural dystopia as in the film Deliverance), or a self-segregated, agrarian utopia, where life is idyllic and residents want nothing to do with ‘city folk’ (à la the sitcom ‘Green Acres’). Post 2016, another frame has emerged: that of rural America as an angry white mob that votes counter to its own interests.”

“These perceptions are patently inaccurate, and they deny the very real fact that rural America is both incubator and innovator when it comes to creating and maintaining civil society.”

“We believe civil society exists when people who live in a defined geographic proximity work cooperatively—even when they strongly disagree with or dislike one another—to sustain mutually beneficial conditions. Think of civil society as a magic flying carpet that, to hold a community aloft, must contain many different fibers. Ideally, everyone in a community supplies at least one fiber to help weave this carpet and get it off the ground. Once in the air, some fibers naturally break off and float away, so all passengers have a responsibility for continual care and reweaving. In densely populated areas, there are enough citizens to supply fibers so that others can coast along for free. In small rural towns, everyone must contribute multiple threads and stay especially vigilant when it unravels to keep it from crashing to the ground. Here are five lessons these rural carpet weavers can teach us:

1. Civil society is rooted in actions, not words. Despite having worked (and sometimes lived) in rural America for nearly 25 years, we have never heard anyone use the words ‘civil society’—not once. Nor, until very recently, have we heard mentions of ‘equity,’ ‘built environment,’ ‘food deserts,’ or ‘capacity deficits.’ The academic terminology used at the confluence of philanthropy, social justice, research, and advocacy isn’t meaningful in the rural context. It’s not that rural people aren’t educated enough to understand this lexicon; rather, they’re too busy engaging in the work of building a civil society to get bogged down in the wordplay. And it’s not that they don’t think deeply—to imply that they don’t would be the ultimate in urban elitism.

2. Civil society abhors siloes. Crossing lines of disciplines and duties is an important standard of civil society in rural America. Individuals play many roles concurrently to keep rural places running. We’ve met a Louisiana pastor who drives a school bus, pastors a 150-member church, runs a daycare, and is part of every civic committee concerning troubled youth. There’s also a school board member who pieces together three jobs and coaches a team vying for the small school state championship. In many rural communities, juggling these multiple civic roles is the norm rather than the exception. This provides a breadth of awareness and civic knowledge that can be elusive in larger urban settings.

3. Civil society can become a bastion of the privileged. In many cases, civil society in rural communities has been controlled by a few, much to the detriment of the whole. This is generally less due to nefarious intent than to a strong charitable impulse of those in power, who may feel a deep sense of responsibility to their hometowns. Those in power are quick
to serve on boards, run for office, donate to local organizations, and speak their minds. While this may ensure some consistency in leadership for civil society, the downside is that this small group of people ultimately control the community. And while alternative leaders usually exist, they may not feel encouraged to engage. Fortunately, rural communities can change this dynamic to foster civil society.

4. Civil society requires constant adaptation. Shifting trends in population, such as influxes of immigrants, are more readily apparent in rural communities than in urban ones. For example, a town of 10,000 is more likely than a city of millions to notice a hundred new neighbors from Senegal. We know of one Colorado community that welcomed immigrants into the fold and, in doing so, kept an important local employer in business. We also know of a town that has become harshly anti-immigrant, weakening the seams of community fabric. Scenarios like these are highly instructive for the rest of America. Communities are living laboratories for issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

5. Rural communities clearly demonstrate the link between economic viability and a strong civil society. The demise of locally owned businesses and their leaders—both main street stores driven out by big box chains, and small enterprises obliterated by the likes of health system conglomerates and corporate agriculture—has diminished the civic energy of many rural communities. In addition to diversifying rural economies, locally rooted institutions often are the first to support local ideas, give young people their first jobs, and participate in efforts that help the community move ahead. As they disappear, they pull mightily at the fibers of the civil society magic carpet, which communities must invent new ways to reweave.

“We often hear the question, ‘If rural communities are struggling so hard, why don’t people leave?’ Time and time again, rural residents have told us that they would rather stay and work to build the future for their communities than abandon them. They are more than willing to work cooperatively, even when they strongly disagree with or dislike one another, because they recognize that they are ultimately neighbors who will fly or fail together.”

“We need to work together to improve education, employment, income, and family and social support—the social and economic factors that influence our communities—we can improve the health of all who live, learn, work, and play there.”

The report can be downloaded at:

Finding Common Ground in a Divided USA

“This report is about polarization in America: what is driving us apart, and what can bring us back together. Political polls and years of knife-edge elections have convinced many that our country has become a 50:50 society, divided into two opposing political tribes and trapped in a spiral of conflict and division.”

“Our research uncovered a different story, one that probes underneath the issues that polarize Americans, and finds seven groups that are defined by their core beliefs, rather than by their political opinions, race, class or gender.”

“In talking to everyday Americans, we have found a large segment of the population whose voices are rarely heard above the shouts of the partisan tribes. These are people who believe that Americans have more in common than that which divides them. While they differ on important issues, they feel exhausted by the division in the United States. They believe that compromise is necessary in politics, as in other parts of life, and want to see the country come together and solve its problems.”

“Our polarization is not simple, but nor is it insoluble. We need to understand it, so we can fix it. More in Common hopes that this report can help inform and inspire this urgent work.”

“The segments have distinctive sets of characteristics; here listed in order from left to right:

- **Progressive Activists** (8%): younger, highly engaged, secular, cosmopolitan, angry.
- **Traditional Liberals** (11%): older, retired, open to compromise, rational, cautious.
- **Passive Liberals** (15%): unhappy, insecure, distrustful, disillusioned.
- **Politically Disengaged** (26%): young, low income, distrustful, detached, patriotic, conspiratorial.
- **Moderates** (15%): engaged, civic-minded, middle-of-the-road, pessimistic, Protestant.
- **Traditional Conservatives** (19%): religious, middle class, patriotic, moralistic.
- **Devoted Conservatives** (6%): white, retired, highly engaged, uncompromising, patriotic.”

“The relevance of the segmentation is evident on a wide array of subjects, from issues of race and prejudice to gender and sexuality. Progressive Activists, the most liberal group, and Devoted Conservatives, the most conservative, show strong degrees of consistency within their ranks, while being almost perfectly at odds with each other. Middle tribes, by contrast, orient themselves incrementally on the ideological spectrum.”

“Further evidence of the relevance of core beliefs and their associated tribal identities is that tribal membership predicts differences in Americans’ views on various political issues better than demographic, ideological, and partisan groupings.”

“But despite these stark differences, this study also finds reasons for hope. America’s political landscape
is much more complicated than the binary split between liberals and conservatives often depicted in the national conversation. In particular, we find, among the seven tribes, an ‘Exhausted Majority,’ whose members do not conform to either partisan ideology.”

“The Exhausted Majority contains distinct groups of people with varying degrees of political understanding and activism. But they share a sense of fatigue with our polarized national conversation, a willingness to be flexible in their political viewpoints, and a lack of voice in the national conversation.”

The report is available at: https://bit.ly/2Pq7RWb

Leadership Insights: “Computer Hell”

The Leadership Insights series is by Jo Anne Preston, RWHC Workforce & Organizational Development Senior Manager. Back issues at www.RWHC.com.

“Imagine a grocery store where all items are randomly shelved, nothing grouped together with like items, no order whatsoever. There are no quick looks upward to see categories listed above the aisles to find what you need. Pretty chaotic and inefficient. Is your computer life a little bit like that? We can spend too many of our brain’s memory megabytes and drain our energy by endlessly looking for what we filed last week (so smartly it seemed at the time) and trying keep every email top of mind. Computer management ‘systems’ can seem too daunting to start but there are simple, quick-win tactics that free up your energy and time for the important work you want to accomplish.”

FIND YOUR FILES: Create Future Focused Electronic Files. “Do not look in the rearview mirror and beat yourself up for how you have misfiled in the past. Start now and go forward with these steps:

1. Pen and paper, list your major work categories. It won’t be perfect, but just do your best. TIP: Ask a colleague who has great organizational skills to help you sort your work into major buckets.

2. Create an electronic folder for each major category. (Think five to eight categories, e.g., supervision, budget, projects, teams, professional development, etc.)

3. Staying future focused, what subcategories fit under each major work area? Create subfolders that make sense currently; you can always add more (e.g. category–teams; subcategories–just culture team, EMR upgrade team, workflow study team, etc.).

4. In each subcategory, include an archive subfolder where you can move things that have been completed that you don’t want to delete, but which are no longer current work.

5. As new documents come in, save them to the new folders via a shortcut.

6. As you find and open documents that you saved elsewhere in the past, save them to the new location and delete the old one.”

CLEAN UP YOUR INBOX: Create a “Processed Mail by Year” Inbox Folder. “You don’t have to be a geek to adapt this idea from the ‘Total Workday Control’ system at:

https://amzn.to/2QOz6Ku

As you go through your inbox, move emails you want to keep or deal with at another time to the current year processed mail folder. This keeps inbox items that you see (where your energy goes) to a much smaller size, deleting nothing that you might need later. There is a marked reduction in energy drain when you manage your inbox. It is not just an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ trick. It is using your brain to your own advantage and it works.”
To care, to serve, to help and be present. This is the heart of a champion of health and the commitment of everyone from doctors, nurses and specialists to cooks, housekeepers and administrators in your hospital.

It is their dedication and expertise that heal us. And their kind words, smiles and ability to understand that soothe us. These are the people who choose to work and live here. To be a champion for you. To be a champion for this community.

When you choose a health plan, ask for (your hospital or health system name here).

YOUR HOSPITAL NAME & LOGO HERE

Join the Health Champions Campaign.

Contact Tim Size at RWHC to discuss how this campaign can drive patient choice in your local markets.
FREE YOURSELF FROM DISTRACTIONS: Get a Grip on Addiction. “Most of us need to. Science validates that interrupting our work by checking email, social media or other electronic ‘shiny objects’ acts similarly in our brain to gambling addiction. Gambling addiction arises through intermittent reinforcement—winning just enough to hook us, though NEVER enough to make us happy. In fact, the intermittent reinforcement has an inverse relationship to happiness.”

“Online distractions (from an interesting email, surge in ‘likes,’ just the pin we’ve been searching for) sets us up to compulsively return to these sites. Then when we restart our work, we do not start where we left off: we backtrack. We fool ourselves that we are taking a rest break but instead we start up a guilt cycle, yet another way we drain our energy for the priority work we need to focus on. Guilt increases stress, reduces productivity and holds us down from what we could achieve.”

Ironically, one way to confront this problem is with an app. “They have great names: gocoldturkey, keepmeout, selfcontrol. Use them to set up your own personal distraction blocker. You structure how you want them to work for you. The ‘world wide web’ is amazing, but use it by choice instead of soothing for ‘I’m tired, bored, stuck, hungry, lonely, anxious, etc.’ Don’t let it rob you of the satisfaction of contributing your best gifts.”

Contact Jo Anne Preston for individual or group coaching at jpreston@RWHC.com or 608-644-3261. For info re the RWHC Leadership Series go to www.RWHC.com/Services.aspx or contact Carrie Ballweg at cballweg@RWHC.com or 608-643-2343.

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