SOCIAL LEARNING, CIVILITY, AND COMPLEX SOCIETIES[1]

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As technological change makes society increasingly complex and erodes traditional relationships, philanthropy must change to meet the demands of the new social environment. Top-down efforts by large organizations and a predisposition toward government action bring short-term results at best. What is most needed is a renewal of a widespread sense of shared responsibility, which is best fulfilled through independent, voluntary action at the level closest to the individuals needing help. As the spontaneous responses to disasters in recent years show, such a sense can indeed be sustained and is a powerful force for good.

In 1983, Richard Cornuelle wrote in *Healing America,* "The Healing of America will require a sustained, systematic expansion of the independent sector deep into the domain now considered the territory of government. That, in turn, will depend on rehabilitating the idea, abandoned in the thirties, of concerted action, national in scope but outside government, to provide stability and security. Our sense of national community apart from the state must somehow be restored" (173).

Ten years later, Cornuelle wrote in the Afterword to the new edition of *Reclaiming the American Dream,* "But the principal obstacle to a revival of independent action is simply its ruined condition" (1993).

Almost two decades later, there are more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations registered in the United States. In 2009 more than 63.4 million Americans volunteered 8.1 billion hours of service worth approximately $169 billion dollars (Independent Sector undated). The proliferation of organizations supposedly dedicated to actions serving the needs of others would appear to conflict with Cornuelle's assertion regarding the ruined condition of this aspect of America. But do the numbers indicate a true "revival of independent action"? To what extent are the principles of mutual aid so important to Cornuelle evident in this independent sector today? How have the changes to the economy brought about by information technology and virtual networks been reflected in this

sector? Why, given these numbers, did we hear, in the light of the disasters in Japan, that the selflessness and belief in the common good so evident in Japanese survivors is utterly lacking here in the United States? What is the social efficacy of these entities and the hours given? How do we learn from these interactions, and what do we learn? Do we see signs of revival?

Spirit of Voluntarism

It is important that we understand that associational activity and the dedication of those 63.4 million volunteers serving others are not cohesive and are not readily defined by any standard definition of philanthropy. This is an area of our lives which is complex, adaptive, and dynamic, never the same to an analyst as it is to the volunteer or the recipient of services. Mutual aid in this country has been profoundly pragmatic, in some ways anathema to both the professionalization and institutionalization we have seen in philanthropy in recent decades. To me, the critical question is not how we are to define this sector, but rather, what do we learn and how do we learn while we act and live within these complexities of helping and being helped? Social learning is defined as observing the behaviors of others and modifying our own behavior in consequence. However, recent understanding of child-directed education expands that definition to acknowledge that the learning which takes place in groups—that is, shared curiosity—changes, accelerates, and deepens learning for all participants.

When referencing voluntary associations, the most common illustration is the bucket brigade or a barn raising. Those may seem quaint, yet every spring we do see volunteers tossing sandbags to help build barriers against floods, and every Thanksgiving those who feed the homeless are overwhelmed by volunteers who wish to help. Think of communities which pooled resources to hire a teacher for their children, and compare that with the home school movement today. It may seem old-fashioned that communities came together to feed threshing crews, well drillers, and firemen, but we still feed firemen, and we still donate our resources to provide for others, be they in New Orleans or Japan. Volunteer associations which have longevity achieve it through constant adaptation to changing needs— the Visiting Nurses in Missouri have become school nurses delivering preventive care after school districts cut school nurses from the budget; gleaners across the nation not only supply themselves with food gleaned from fields and distribution centers but also feed the homeless and women in shelters; and community

kitchens have become training centers for cooks (Egger 2002). The energy that begins an effort of mutual aid is entrepreneurial in nature: a new way to address a need is seen, people are recruited to participate, and the work begins.

Institutionalization, Professionalization

However, many associations that began with a noble desire to help, become unhelpful over time. They become dedicated to their own survival rather than to serving the need they first identified. As both institutionalization and professionalization have increased, two attitudes in particular have worked against what Cornuelle and others hoped would become a movement toward greater civic responsibility. One is the assumption that the measures and standards of business can be applied to all forms of human activity. The second is that in competing for "talent" the nonprofit world must seek the same kinds of managers and leaders as do private companies, and that only this kind of talent has value. The latter view adopts a condescension and dismissal of volunteers most frequently expressed in phrases such as, "Volunteers are unreliable; unless someone is paid they will not do the job." This attitude is astounding, given that all entrepreneurs were essentially volunteer in service of their own passion for a number of years, and further, that most of the enduring institutions of democracy have been created and sustained by volunteers. Some of the greatest successes of American society—such as peaceful transitions of power, the testing of the polio vaccine, the provision of free information through libraries—have been organized and conducted by volunteers. Recently, after Hurricane Katrina, we all witnessed the effectiveness of local volunteer efforts to provide immediate relief and long-term restoration against all the odds, while actions by governments and large foundations were plagued by delays and failures.

Much of the research into and discussion of the voluntary sector, the independent sector, and the nonprofit world has focused on the relationship between government and the sector. Various U.S. presidents have advocated volunteer activities, but publicity campaigns such as "a thousand points of light" seem to evolve to a default discussion of financial relationships. It is argued that since nonprofit entities seek grants from government (and from philanthropy which imitates government) this sector has become an extension of the public sector. Cornuelle wanted the sector to *compete* with government for responsibility for social services, but current research would argue that there can be no such competition because of the scale of the need for services and because the

nonprofit sector may have become dependent on government (Cornuelle 1993). Peter Drucker maintained that participation in the social sector would help restore civic responsibility in ways not possible through government, employment, or private enterprise (1999). If we think of volunteer activities as learning activities, we quickly understand that this takes place in groups, preferably small groups, not in interactions appeasing grant priorities.

As local social service organizations compete for grants, their own activities are in large part determined by the funding priorities and evaluation strategies of granting entities. Not only does this make real collaboration and prevention of duplication within a locality difficult, it also means that a local social service agency is subject to the frustrations of an entrepreneur starting a business: both become dependent on changing whims and exit strategies of those providing the funding. As the priorities change, often with political winds, efforts become increasingly superficial and artificial—if a granting agency wants to see local partnerships, the grant-seeking entity cobbles together for the purposes of the application just such partnerships, without any intent to learn or work together after the money is received.

Similarly, although much innovation is taking place in faith-based services, these organizations compete with each other for a shared or "captive" donor base, again limiting the potential for collaboration and social learning. Furthermore, because the priorities of the granting agencies are established for their own self-interest, rarely are specific and pragmatic local needs viewed as important as these funding source priorities. Even worse, the local entity may become dependent on these sources and, in consequence, no longer capable of fully serving or being directly relevant to its own locality (Ellerman 2007). Even the professionalization of the sector addresses the priorities of external funders, so that, say, a home health agency whose clients are primarily Hmong and Spanish speakers sets as its hiring criteria an MBA in health care administration because that is the funders' qualification, yet it does not look for those who speak the languages of the clients served. Finally, because it is now assumed that voluntary associations must at least make themselves over in the image of a business in order to appear competitive and/or successful, there is a grave reluctance to close or sunset such an association. Now such closure means failure. In the past, such closure might have indicated that a need had been met successfully.

The language of competition and the vocabulary of combat dominate policy and analysis of this sector. We have wars and task forces on poverty, cancer, etc., and we use the metrics of domination and control to judge outcomes. One consequence is that programs and projects become self-protective and closed, rather than open and

expansive. During the period of the $206 billion "tobacco windfall" of funds for local health initiatives, states and municipalities across the nation found that it was almost impossible to (a) **convene** nonprofits to set priorities regarding spending (passionate people who had almost identical missions of service simply did not want to be in the same rooms with each other), and (b) agree on the **balance** between spending for short-term needs (including paying off municipal debt) versus long-term infrastructure which would prevent those needs from arising (such as training programs to create skilled workers among the unemployed) (Tragakiss 2009). Even though the tobacco tax agreement was in perpetuity, it was very hard for both politicians and nonprofit leaders to see beyond the current quarterly or grant cycle timeframe in order to plan the use of allocated funds for the future. The cultural attitudes of both competition and immediacy sabotaged the potential long-term benefit.

In a collaborative space, by contrast, all constituents see direct value in participating in the association. Value is not associated with place as in a hierarchy, or with function as in, for example, hospital care. Value is associated with the availability of resources and learning, so that the more participants there are in the collaboration, the greater its value. This means that expansion is positive and anticipates improvement, not a threat to performance, rewards, or capacity. These are lessons we need in our pluralist society.

As we look at the social fields of individuals and groups, we can see that markets have no single socio-cultural frontier and that the transmission and expansion of knowledge constantly change any frontiers or boundaries of those social fields. When our social fields become self-protective, we limit our learning; we close ourselves off. We have only to look to the academic world to see a mirror of this specialization, lack of communication, and consequent isolation. Just as in academic specialties, the self-interest of a service organization designed to address a specific need becomes a property to be defended and bounded fiercely. How, then, can we hope to connect our desires to serve others with shared responsibility?

Shared Learning

Complicating the current situation of the sector is the expansion of intellectual property law to include methods, procedures, and techniques as forms of property (Fisher undated; Hyde 2010). Social service entities become even less willing to collaborate and share what they do and what they know in order to establish best practices if their methods and practices can be "owned." It is far easier to forget the mission of your organization if you are busy defending its property and if its

ideas have become commodities for grant-seeking markets.[2] The reasons this is important for our discussion include the conflict between what we have viewed as "public interest" or "the commons"; the dedication of talent to defense rather than delivery; and the destruction of collaborative knowledge-building in this climate. In a philosophic sense, we have moved an enormous distance from the mentor and apprenticeship models which transmitted mores as well as skills and kept our multigenerational communities creative.

Many of our volunteer associations and mutual aid efforts in the past did serve to sustain mentorship within communities by both teaching and giving opportunities for practicing effective ways of addressing the challenges of experience. Shared learning contributed to the continuity and sustainability of social groups. What was shared was directly relevant to the way of life, available resources, needs, and endurance of the group over time. Learning was functional: what was learned was to be practiced; otherwise the skill or wisdom would be lost. In traditional communities, the homesteading environments of the North American West, or refugee camps across the world, skills were taught through apprenticeships, and it was acknowledged that it took time to acquire real expertise. Sugata Mitra has shown in his child-driven education experiments how very quickly and profoundly children can teach themselves and change their worlds (2010). His conclusion is that education is a self-organizing system and learning is an emergent phenomenon. I would extend that view to say that when mutual aid is self-organizing, we will also see learning emerge.

Although most learning in a traditional or cohesive community was informal and lifelong, it was also purposive. Parents and elders, often within ritual contexts, purposefully taught children skills and precepts of behavior. These were and are considered necessary lessons in becoming an adult or a functioning member of society (Kedrayate undated; Stoller 2004). A community is a group of people who, though diverse, are interdependent, bound together by mutual responsibilities arising out of a common history or common purpose which they have not simply chosen to be a part of but which they are responsible for sustaining over time. When we hear the admiration for the Japanese sense of obligation to the common good being shown in the weeks after the earthquake, we must remember that this is taught consistently and repeatedly throughout Japanese schools and in the Japanese family. It is not a behavior which has arisen spontaneously in the face of adversity.

Paucity of Social Connections

One of the most challenging social issues in American society is disaster preparedness. We know from sad experience that neither the agencies of government nor private enterprise will arrive in time to save us, our property, or the communities we cherish when disaster happens. The lessons learned are also obvious and readily available to anyone, anywhere. However, the issue is that so far, recruitment to preparedness has largely failed. We are not willing to emerge from our private worlds and definitions of safety to the civic world of shared responsibility, even on our own behalf. Why?

Thanks to our garage door openers, many of us rarely need to step foot in common space. Thanks to our screened realities, many of us neither participate in nor are aware of the school projects of our neighbors' children, let alone whose supplemental oxygen will stop if we have a power failure in the neighborhood. The former door-to-door activities, including in many areas of the country events such as Halloween and the sale of Girl Scout cookies, have been stopped or deflected to space more "secure" than our neighborhoods. These are reflective of the choices we are making to live in terms of fear and suspicion rather than of curiosity and exploration. When major media networks broadcast constantly about "the terrorist next door," we become less likely to borrow a lawnmower or even a cup of sugar.

The market today does not build connection to a commons, for our needs as consumers can now be fulfilled either across the Internet or in a mall unrelated to our homes and neighbors and to which we drive alone. Our economic lives increasingly do not require us to be engaged with real people in real time. Many of us used to find community and a sense of shared meaning and learning at our places of work. This too is changing as increasing numbers of us work in isolation. Furthermore, we are expected to achieve in competition, not in collaboration, even though in fact no achievement has ever been accomplished in isolation from the contributions of others.

Sometimes we forget, in our contemporary arrogance, that our technologies do not determine our intelligence any more than our communities are mere projections of our separate selves. We define ourselves through relationships, and we live not only in various contexts and environments but in systems which we co-create and must endure as well as explore.

Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler have shown us how profoundly our connections shape us and how our social networks can have intelligence, memory, and the ability to self-replicate (2011). These are not the Facebook and Twitter networks designed by entrepreneurs; these are the social networks we create as

we live our lives. Christakis and Fowler show in rich complexity that our social networks are public goods and their purpose is to transmit what benefits us all.

This brings us back to the concept of mutual aid and the issue of civic responsibility. In the past year we have heard that virtual networks have brought about the fall of dictators. In 2008 we saw the use of messaging to mobilize and fundraise for political purposes in unprecedented numbers. We watched Susan Boyle rise from invisibility to global recognition in a matter of days, and we cheered for her. Most of us are grateful for the vast resources now available through the Internet, which has been described as the greatest learning tool the world has known (Lewis et al. 2010, 1-19). On the other hand, we have seen the pictures of children texting one another while sitting within reach of each other, and we have despaired of the drivers who nearly run us down as they talk on their cell phones or text something while driving. The immediate has taken over.[3] What the virtual world makes possible acquires our constant attention, and companies now compete for "eyeballs."

How, then, do we connect the world of virtual interactions to our need for a generative community which takes responsibility for the shaping of meaning and of the governance of our lives? Can we revitalize our voluntary associations with our new tools and technologies in ways which better serve to construct coherence in this complex society? What would it take to ignite our desires to take collaborative action together in order to heal America?

Reclaiming Our Sense of Shared Purpose

Slowly, with new media and readily available communication, we are beginning to understand how the whole of humanity is greater than the sum of its parts (Christakis and Fowler 2011). If we aspire in our own lives to live in a self-organizing system which affirms our capacities, our connections, our self-reliance, and our opportunities, then we must overcome our current culture of fear. We have the tools to better understand how all that we do influences and is influenced by others, but we must embrace the complexity in which our lives are embedded.

Social learning does take place despite our isolation and fear. Whenever we observe others and then imitate what we have seen, or apply what we understand, we learn. Similarly, when we strive to achieve a shared purpose with others, each member contributes to the actions taken and the skills applied. As Mitra has shown with children, four or five individuals, encouraged by one another, will accelerate the learning of each one (2010). In our neighborhoods, workplaces, and churches this is happening all the time. Most importantly, as we value each others' stories, we

are learning the lessons from experience and imagining a way forward, or a shared hope. The structure of the independent sector may be fraught with problems, but the human substance of the sector is constantly working to change lives.

There are no separate sectors. Sometimes what is labeled individual is in fact part of someone else's business plan; sometimes what we view as government is merely a memory; sometimes what seems to be a market is in fact a fair where participants are celebrating the coherence, not the contracts, of their lives. We cannot overcome our sense of private isolation and public despair without becoming explorers of new possibility. Voluntary associations give us that potential; the assets and roots of our wisdom already exist, and we will discover them in mutual effort or not at all. We need not compete with governments to reclaim our own sense of agency: governments leave enough undone and unexplored so there is plenty of opportunity for transforming our lives. Our own sense of agency can become a bulwark against both dependence upon and intrusion from governance.

We have learned the lessons from Katrina, from our immigrant ancestors, and from the unhelpful help of institutionalized goodwill: we must start small, in our own neighborhoods, workplaces, churches, sports teams, and the like. The impact of our energy has to be evident around us: taking what we learn in building better lives for those we care about and live with, we will be able to build better lives through the expanding empathy we discover. Effective mutual aid and voluntary association are not dedicated toward centers of power and policy, and most of us have realized that top-down efforts have short-term results. Healing takes the tincture of time, and it also requires a vocabulary of hope. Our complex world has been built by optimists and adventurers who embraced the paradox and ambiguity of knowing that what would emerge from shared effort would be something mysterious, unknown, and immeasurably fascinating. It is our responsibility to seek out the margins and boundaries of our assumptions regarding what is possible, until we glimpse, like a promised land, the emergent whole.

NOTES

[1] Prepared for the 36th Annual Conference of The Association of Private Enterprise Education, Nassau, Bahamas, April 10-12, 2011.

[2] Lewis Hyde is especially eloquent about how readily we use our shared cultural property to explore what it means to be human and how much is lost when the public voices are privatized. See the chapter "The Common Self Now," p. 187.

[3] See the works of MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle on what screened realities are doing to the social and emotional development and literacy of current adolescents. Also see Twenge 2009.

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