

Self-Help: Building Communities of Competence

by Sam W. Brown

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Thank you for the warm welcome. The theme of this conference is voluntarism in the 80's --its implications and the issues. After having attending more than a dozen conferences which have as their theme the 80's, I have come to the conclusion that what people really want to talk about is how to get away from the 70's. No one really likes the 1970's. It is a decade that most people would like to forget.

If the 1950's were like a sunny afternoon for many people to paraphrase Elizabeth Hartwick, and the 60's a violent summer thunderstorm that very size drew us outside to look at it, I think most people have come to the conclusion that the 1970's were like a cold, steady drizzle--the type that makes people want to stay in bed.

I say all this because it seems to me that we really can't define the 80's until we take some measure of the 70's which began with one mass movement--the Vietnam Moratorium -- in which I participated, and ended with another, the tax revolt led by Howard Jarvis. If they were dissimilar movements with different ends and different people participating in them they nevertheless had one thing in common--a dislike, indeed what one might describe as an intense dislike, of government policy. The obvious question is what happened in between.

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There seem to me to be two different perspective about what happened in between the Moratorium and Jarvis. The first perspective is that a great deal did happen that has made it easier for people to volunteer and to participate in the shaping of public policy. Indeed, some people have argued, that more has been done in the last decade to open the system up than in any other in this century and what happened in the 70's can only be equated with the Jacksonian Era in the opening of our political process.

Blacks began to move from the margin of our society, young people were given the right to vote, women began the long process to redress the power balance between the sexes, consumers began with some effectiveness to counter corporate power, and environmentalists, once considered bird and bicycle freaks who were always on a Rocky Mountain High, could look back at the 70's as the decade in which they established their legitimacy.

A whole range of administrative and legislative processes were established to allow people to volunteer--to participate: the Freedom of Information Act, the Federal Sunshine Act, the opening up of our national political parties with the expanded use of primaries, the Federal funding of Presidential Elections, and the use of Environmental Impact statements just to name a few. All of this has led some people to conclude that people's desire to volunteer--and here I mean their active participation in public decision-making "represents a social force that will dominate our social and political life for years to come". Citizen participation has become a movement and voluntarism has a new meaning that reflects the changes that have taken place.

The other perspective is that nothing of fundamental significance really happened in the 1970's. Ralph Nader observed last October at the National Conference on Citizen Participation that of the national problems that confronted this country in 1965 none of them, in his opinion had diminished in seriousness. Except for the ending of the Vietnam War, the retirement of Richard Nixon to San Clemente, and the decrease in traffic casualties --the problems of the 60's had in fact been "exacerbated". What Ralph Nader was suggesting to his audience was that they had become so caught up with tinkering with the "complex systems" which we have created that they were ignoring the fundamental issue of who has power in our society. People had become more concerned with the means--citizen participation and how to do it--than the end--the redistribution of power in our society.

It seems that there are two conflicting trends in our society. On the one hand, we find ourselves in the very strange position of having opened the system up only to have more and more people decide that they don't want to be in it. They don't want to participate. The decline in voter participation is tangible evidence that more and more people are taking a walk--close to 70 million people in terms of the last Presidential election. That is an extraordinary figure.

On the other hand, I think all of us can agree that more citizens than ever are taking an active role and voluntary role in shaping our society. If the 60's was the decade of mass movements and large scale demonstrations, the 70's could be defined as the period when more people than ever committed themselves to the long term effort to bring about fundamental change of those institutional structures and processes that are denying people their dignity--whether it be improving the care given the elderly in nursing homes or fighting the rate hike by a public utility that people believe to be unwarranted.

Voluntarism as it was defined in the early 1970's has changed in terms of who volunteers, how they volunteer and why they volunteer. Voluntarism is no longer just a women's second occupation--40% of all volunteers are men. People increasingly volunteer by joining "self-help" groups and people seem to be volunteering because they perceive that it is in their own long term interest to do so. Voluntarism is now a two way street. For some people voluntarism has become part of the career ladder. For others, voluntarism has become a

way to protect themselves against what is considered the corrosive power of government.

So what are we to make of all this?

Obviously, the "flight from politics" is injurious to our society, and in the short term I think more and more people will volunteer to opt out of the political process. That seem's to me to be incredibly bad. No democratic society can endure for long when people withdraw their support from it and that is what people essentially are doing by not voting.

The common explanation for this withdrawal from politics is the decline of the political parties. That's obviously a major factor. But I would suggest that on a deeper level there are other reasons why the political mood of the country is what it is today. I would go so far to say that we live at the "edge of history" in a period of fundamental political transition. Let me cite three reasons.

First, for over forty years, ever since the New Deal, the Federal government has been creating programs in response to emergencies, perceived needs, and our continued efforts to make our society more equitable. They were needed, and to a large extent successful. But, bit by bit, the accumulative effect of these programs has been to strip away from individuals that sure sense that by their participation in them they will have control over their own destiny. People have come to believe that their very sense of self-hood--their identity as individuals and citizens has been taken away from them.

The recognition that the fundamental way we have been doing business at best doesn't work the way it's supposed to and at worst can actually strip people of their dignity has made us all uncertain about what to do. I don't think it is an accident that the Congress has really not passed any major piece of social legislation in the last two years. Congress reflects the doubts we all have.

Second, for many people the solution to this sense of helplessness has been to attack every progressive program established by the Federal government. Anything Federal is by definition bad. The cry has been taken up all across the country and especially here in the West--no Federal controls.

A third reason for the turmoil which exists, and which has led many people to flee away from the realities of politics is simply

this: the energy crisis has brought Americans to the edge of an abyss and when they looked over it they have seen that our highway and highrise culture is at best dependent on outside forces such as OPEC and at worst in danger of collapsing. For many Americans that is difficult to accept. It has been made even more difficult by their recognition that we are dependent on nations, largely non-white and non-western, that have been considered in the past our economic if not cultural inferiors.

All these forces are at play in our society. It is little wonder why then people have thrown up their hands and withdrawn to Monday Night Football and Howard Cosell.

On the other hand, there is a countervailing positive force that is underway in the effort by those people who are committed to changing our society for the better through "self-help" groups. In a sense, the countless millions of Americans who are involved in voluntary "self-help" groups are attempting to redefine-- to strike a new balance-- between what the individual citizen can do and often do better and what the government should do and must do to protect the integrity of the individual.

Christopher Lasch, the cultural historian, has gone so far as to suggest that the "withdrawal from politics" and the emergence of "self-help" groups which are committed to building "communities of competence at the local level" is the beginning of a general political movement against what he describes as the "new paternalism" of the managerial and bureaucratic elite of our society. In doing so Lasch seems to be echoing Aldous Huxley, who wrote in 1946 in the preface to his book, *Brave New World*, that "only a large scale popular movement toward decentralization and self-help can arrest the present tendency toward statism."

It seems to me that the self-help volunteer movement does reflect a new attitude. Competitive individualism, the traditional ideology of our society, seems to be giving way to what some political thinkers call "communitarianism". A conflict is taking place between those who espouse communal values--sharing, caring, neighborliness, the interdependence of all of us, the common humanity of all of us--and our traditional ethos which has all of us believing that we should be more like John Wayne. Whether this communitarianism is the beginning of a funda-

mental transformation of our politics as Lasch has suggested is something none of us will be able to discern till we come back together at the end of the 1980's to talk about the 1990's.

And if there is an issue that will define the true measure of the "self-help" movement in the 1980's and determine whether it is to have a lasting effect on our society it seems to me that it will be how we come to terms with the energy crisis. There is a growing recognition, from the experts at the Harvard Business School on down, that a solar/conservation policy is the most clear, direct and efficient way for America to meet the energy crisis. Such a policy is by its nature decentralized and requires a great deal of self-help on the part people in their communities.

Those communities that have succeeded in devising a way to meet their own energy needs like Davis, California and Portland, Oregon are those communities that did not wait for the federal government to put its own energy policy together. They helped themselves.

The self-help volunteer movement does reflect that fact that people want to accept responsibility for their own lives. If it has a slogan probably the most appropriate one is that seen on a storefront in Oregon-- "Together, we can do it ourselves". Though small in numbers the government programs like ACTION's which focus on the use of volunteers can help to breakdown the bureaucratic and social barriers which make people fearful, dependent, and unwilling to reach out to help others.

I believe that people can become self-reliant if we are willing to discard the old assumption that we must be totally dependent on the government or large corporations for the opportunity to work. We can build our communities from the bottom up. Neighborhoods can become as important as downtown skyscrapers. Co-ops can become as important to the economic well-being of our communities as banks. Preventive health can replace curative treatment as the way to stay healthy. Neighborhood justice centers can become as important as lawyers. Economic development which stresses equity for all can replace economic growth for the few. Self-reliance can replace dependency. Self-help can replace welfare. A politics of values can replace a politics of interest.

So it seems to me that what we are about, in a larger sense, has less to do with making

sure that the federal government is just open to voluntarism and much more to do with creating a society in which sharing, caring, neighborliness, equity and self-reliance are the core values both here at home and abroad. Those of us at ACTION, our volunteers in the Peace Corps, in VISTA, and in our older American programs are committed to that larger goal.

Communities do not grow overnight. Communities do not spring up because government officials, like myself, say they must. They develop only if there are people concerned about shared values--which can be the bedrock for building a loving national community.

This conference has as its focus a new strategy for the 1980's. It also, I think, celebrates the human spirit and your determination as volunteers and friends to break down the barriers of greed, fear, injustice, and cynicism that prevents America from living up to the dreams we have for it.