

This paper is one of a series of individual essays written within the conceptual constraints provided by "Forms for a Future." The collection of essays will become the individual episodes of the podcast.

'... Forums for A Future...'

Podcast (#16) Interpersonal and Public Tools for Change
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Prelude

Part I of my podcast series contains a brief 2-minute promotional and a conceptual foundation for thinking about change as the convergence of economic, political, social and personal perspectives. Part II is a set of four podcasts providing a philosophy for the 21st century. Part III is a set of four podcasts describing three lessons from modern history on the interplay of Power, Wealth and Belief for informing the present. Part IV contains three prescriptive principles for having a future. Part V describes two "Tools for Change." Today, in Podcast # 16, I will discuss the second of these two tools, those that are: Interpersonal and Public.

Key Concept

We have a uniquely Interpersonal and Public responsibility for the future that is the foundation for civic life and for the preservation of the democratic process.

Introduction

In the most simple and straightforward terms, Thomas Friedman laid out, from an economic perspective that the world has fundamentally changed. Specifically, that the transition from December 31, 1999 to January 1, 2000, qualitatively, was a far bigger jump than one day. His arguments make economic sense. Almost overnight we entered a flat world. Globalization had taken hold. The challenge is whether American workers will sink to the lower wage standard set by India and China in a global race to the bottom, or whether the rest of the world will be lifted to the higher American standard through endless growth.

However, from an historical and social science perspective, Jared Diamond sees collapse as the inevitable end point of the pursuit of endless growth. The difference, he argues, between the past and the present is that the collapse we now face is of planet itself, not an isolation society here and there. Globalization is just that. It is a global context in which the human "footprint" is on the planet itself. Simply put, the planet will not support Friedman's economic solution. From a strictly economic perspective Friedman's theory is rational, until it bumps squarely into the absolute limits of endless growth as the end-point of a social, not an economic, perspective.

Finally, Gwynne Dyer laid out the dimensions of the world political scene that are required to negotiate the clash between responding to the economic demands of a flat world for endless growth, with the real limits to growth. It is a formidable political task. But, it is a task that the world had positioned itself to tackle through the United Nations. By plodding, albeit ponderously, to avoid the worst of the Cold War, the UN had positioned itself by the turn of this Century to extend its cooperative processes for world peace to the new economic challenges of a flat world. That process was abruptly interrupted by the United States with its invasion of Iraq and its unilateral war on terrorism. Now, the question for the future, is whether that damage can be undone, or whether the US has unleashed the greatest terror of all -- mortally destroying the very process that could save human kind from its worst fate of collapse -- all in the name of democracy and Christian theology.

From all three perspectives, it is time for intense civic discussions within the United States. Are we, as the most powerful nation in the world, going to set the tone for leading the economically globalized world toward a cooperative, democratic (nonviolent) response to the real limits of growth, or, are we are going to be the prime mover in taking out the entire planet in a doomsday pursuit, under (our) God, of the American way of life?

A sobering quote from the Vietnam War was: "Unfortunately we had to destroy the village in order to save it (from communism)". The modern equivalent for each of us in the United States to considered in this new era is the proposition: "Unfortunately we had to destroy the planet in order to save it (for unrestrained capitalism)."

Yes, it is time for intense civic discussions, both within our families, and between us and our friends and associates from work and play. By civic discussions, I mean formally structured occasions when people who are known to each other, and who share some common basis of association, sit down together, face to face, and have serious exchanges about their collective future.

Why Family Political Forums?

The concept of a generation gap is now dysfunctional. There is only one future, and it is the one shared by all of those who are alive today. If you are a young person, talk to your parents and your grandparents. If you are an adult talk to the young people in your family. Casual passing comments are not sufficient. We need to have the discussions with forethought in a structured setting in which there is a pre-established protocol.

Forums are organized in advance with an agenda. Participants come with advance notice of what will be discuss so there is time for thoughtful preparation. Forums have moderators so the discussion is civil, focused and orderly. This means the dialogue is free of loud domination by any one person. Forums discover and acknowledge the diversity of opinions within the group.

These are political (civic) discussions because the primary goal of a forum is not unanimity, but rather hearing and acknowledging the range of issues and perspectives that must be accommodated. Families care about each other; they take care of each other despite differences of opinion. It is far easier to accommodate the needs and perspectives of someone you love and

understand, than it is a faceless stranger. The recognition and accommodation of difference is a process. It takes time. It takes the opportunity for follow-up conversations on what was started during the forum. Follow-up requires participants to share real time and space to allow for the dialogue that reconciles differences, that deepens tolerance, and that dilute one's own absolute truths to relative beliefs. This is a political process, and it has its roots in the community that is closest to our heart, our own family.

There is no better place to begin than where understanding and accommodation of difference is deeply personal, and where continuity of the conversation is possible. Ultimately, it is the future of your son or daughter, or your parents, which is at issue. Each of us is in the same boat as every other member of our family. It is a common future, regardless of age, gender or occupation.

Why Public Political Forums?

Second only to family, is our network of friends and associates with whom we share our play and work time. Although we share with each one of those only some specific communality -- a hobby, a fraternal organization, a vocation, or an apartment building -- collectively our circle of friends and associates encompass a wide range of experiences and histories.

Unfortunately, politics are often "off-limits" as a topic for casual conversation; least it opened a divide that would intrusively corrupt the quality of the primary association. Yet, our friends and associates are a rich resource, one that need not be endangered by respectful efforts to learn about, and understand, their points of view about contemporary social issues. Forums offer conversational safe harbors because of their formal civil structure.

A forum is respectful. Forums do not seek consensus, nor are they a debate. They are an open and forthright exchange in which participants have the opportunity to broaden their appreciation of each other by honestly answering questions and by respectfully listening to the answers of others. Such discussion make clear the range of accommodation and mutual respect that is required for the democratic process to work. A friend or associate will be given that mutual respect far more easily than a unknown person with a view contrary to our own.

Democracy is not about winning. Democracy is a process for duly respecting the perspective of others.

Such discussions can seldom achieve their outcome on the spot. Forums are simply a starting point for a process. They are a process that the interpersonal nature of the group allows to ripple forward into on-going discussions. Forums are the start of a deeper sense of community. They are a modern replacement for the old green commons in the center of the village where all of the residence ended up at various times in assorted combinations. Now, of course, with other means of communication we are no longer dependent upon a physical grass square in the center of the village. Rather, we each have many "villages," often without common geography. With a little effort, the modern equivalent of the "village green" can enrich our civic life by providing continuity to the civil, civic dialogue essential to the democratic process.

However, perhaps the most important reason for Public Political Forums is that they make us individually accountable for our beliefs. It is far harder to hold poorly formulated beliefs if they are openly exposed to public view. We are much more likely to act in responsible ways if what we think and do is known to our friends, associates and neighbors. Interpersonal responsibility requires removing the veil from our private beliefs and actions, and allowing them to be public. To be public is to be visible and accountable to our friends and our associates, and for them to be likewise to us.

The result is community.

As a modern society we have been in retreat from community, for which we have paid a heavy civic price. We cannot afford to continue that trend.

Civic Life and Preservation of the Democratic Process

One of the most devastating consequences of the Iraq war has been the silencing of criticism. At the time of the invasion, to speak forthrightly about why the decision to invade was foolish, reckless and ill-advised was to be portrayed, at best, as unpatriotic, and, at worst, as a real and present danger to America, no less than the terrorist themselves. Even today six years later, there is reluctance, even among the current Democratic presidential hopefuls, to simply say this was a terrible mistake. We desperately need a modern equivalent of a green Commons in which the essential civic discussions take place, freely, openly and continuously.

Material for Organizing and Holding Political Forums

Sample material for organizing either a Family or Public Political Forum may be downloaded from the [Forums for a Future](http://www.kerenner.com) homepage at:

www.kerenner.com

From the Home Page, select “Forums for a Future” and go to Podcast #16. Here there is a direct link to a WinZip Folder for both Family and Public Political Forums. Each folder contains seven editable files that may be freely copied and adapted for local use. The files are:

1. A brochure for announcing a Forum
2. A one-page Descriptive Poster
3. Instructions for organizing a Forum
4. A sample agenda
5. A registration form
6. A ten-point list of contemporary social issues to stimulate thoughtful preparation in advance of the Forum, and
7. A brief (3 minute) Power Point presentation that can be used by a moderator to introduce the Forum

Lets us begin the process of respectful formal civic discussions about our collective future. Making democracy work is an individual responsibility. The self-serving beliefs of those who now control and profit from the status quo will no longer do. The time to claim the future is now.