

# Creating the Social Movement We Need for the 21st Century

*Tom Pollak, September 2011*

*“We must work passionately and indefatigably to bridge gulf between our scientific progress and our moral progress “ – Martin Luther King, Jr.*

There are many lessons to draw from the Civil Rights Movement, but the one that matters most now is this: We need disciplined moral action rooted in the belief that we must build from a shared vision of a community where, as Martin Luther King put it, "all God's children...can sit down together at the table of Brotherhood" – this approach can transform hearts and minds in a way that often divisive efforts for short-term political victories do not. Politics IS important, but we need to start paying attention to our underlying civic culture.

We are at a fork in the road. We need to start “doing the work of crisis without the crisis” or we could find the next manageable crisis, whatever its origins, spiral out of control. More than ever, we need a worthy successor to the Civil Rights Movement today if the United States is to remain a vibrant democracy through the next several decades of looming environmental, fiscal, economic, social and national security challenges.

The movement we need should not be a protest movement but a builders' movement – a movement of people and organizations of good will who recognize that we need to build civic capacity to "think globally and act locally," to take responsibility for leading well-balanced healthy lives – emotionally, spiritually, ethically, physically, socially – and to work and sacrifice together as communities and as a nation to solve our major challenges. There are a good number of people on the left and on the right, in the political world and out, saying or feeling essentially the same thing but using different vocabularies.<sup>i</sup>

We CAN organize our lives and our communities better to tackle the challenges of our generation. There are communities in the U.S. and abroad that are both substantially better and far worse than the typical U.S. community. These differences should help us appreciate that it's not just a question of “human nature.” Culture and leadership are key—and the former, to paraphrase Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, can be changed by the latter.<sup>ii</sup>

This movement should appeal to people across the political spectrum. For liberals, this movement is about strengthening the underpinnings of community and government, about building our political will and our capacity for sustained work as a country. It is also about moving past dogmas about the inherent evil of government to a mature understanding that "getting the institutions of collective action right" is a difficult, time-consuming, conflict-invoking process,<sup>iii</sup> but there's no viable alternative. And it is about recognizing that our freedom is inextricably tied to our responsibilities as individuals, communities and as a nation.

For conservatives, this movement is about refocusing on personal responsibility, on recognizing that government can't solve all our problems. Energetic communities can and have organized

themselves around a shared vision of the world where we are all responsible for one another. It is about strengthening our economy through unleashing creativity and innovation. And about encouraging young people to focus on careers that truly benefit their communities and the nation—whether in science, social work, the arts, or elsewhere.

### ***Personal Barriers***

The barriers for our nation are not just political or with the opposing political party or out there with the "other guy." They are in our personal challenges to see and bring out the good, the best, in others; to keep our eyes on what's important, not on activities that eat away at our time for action, reflection or connecting with one another; in our temptation to morally disengage from the daunting civic challenges all around us, and in our impulse to disengage from worthwhile relationships or civic work when we encounter minor annoyances or when progress feels slow; and in our instinctive tendencies for self-deception.<sup>iv</sup> Put more broadly, the barriers are in our failure to take personal responsibility for being fit mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

### ***How Change Could Happen: A Concrete Plan***

Just because we haven't seen any major social movements on the scale of the Civil Rights Movement in the past forty years doesn't mean that it can't happen again. From my perspective, all we can do is keep testing the waters, doing what we believe needs to be done and see if it grabs the public's imagination.

Change can start with a small number of people. It will occur faster if some of those people are the leaders in their communities, but it is not absolutely necessary, as the Civil Rights Movement showed. (Two of the most significant efforts of the movement, Freedom Summer and the Freedom Rides, for example, involved about 1,000 people for the first and only half that number in the latter.) Here's one scenario that seems plausible to me:

It could start with a modest number of community foundations, United Ways, civic, religious and political leaders in communities around the country vowing to work together to strengthen their communities from the ground up. We're starting to have success doing this at a community level with our "Community Platform," a web-based toolkit my small team at the Urban Institute has been developing to provide tools, resources, and data for helping nonprofit organizations and community members understand their communities, map assets and needs, coordinate work, and learn from one another about what's working and what's not. Our partners are gearing up for launching their first round of projects this fall, and we are planning how to take this work to a deeper level and to a broader scale.

These civic leadership organizations would agree to lead by example, just as the leaders of the civil rights movement did when they stood their ground in the face of police dogs and batons. The moral leadership we need today is not in getting beaten or arrested. Instead, my hope is that at least some of our partners would take "vows of moderation" – agreeing to accept salaries of no

more than \$100,000 perhaps with adjustments for regional cost of living and to ensure savings for retirement and children's education.<sup>v</sup> What matters is that they demonstrate a commitment through their actions – something that is sometimes missing in the world of major nonprofit organizations.

Second, they would recruit nonprofit service and grassroots organizations – the human service, housing, arts, and environmental organizations (to name a few) – to join them in creating a community-wide movement. These organizations are often preoccupied with the daily challenges of fundraising and sustaining programs; however, they are home to many of the people who have organized their lives for public service and who immediately recognize the importance of strengthening civic capacity for both their own organizations as well as for the greater good.

Third, they would agree to spend several hours each week working together to canvass their communities one home at a time to make the one-on-one contacts needed to recruit others to volunteer or support local organizations, to identify the needs of community members, and to recruit residents to join Neighborhood Leadership Circles.<sup>vi</sup>

These circles or groups, perhaps meeting monthly or every other week over dinner for dialogue and reflection, provide space to build the web of connections, the social fabric that makes for vibrant communities and to help teach the civic leadership skills needed for the community. You could think of them as combining some of the features of book clubs, Bible study groups, and neighborhood watches. Some could focus on neighborhood issues, others on community-wide challenges, and still others on national topics.

It's also important to balance the external focus with attention to what each of us can do in our personal lives; maintaining this balance keeps the process 'real.' It's much easier to be humble and patient with others when we see how hard change can be in our own lives—whether it's exercising more, changing our diet, learning new habits for interacting with others, or setting aside a half hour every morning for reflection.

Fourth, we would work to bring the local efforts under a common banner to maximize its national visibility. Call it the Responsibility Revolution? The National Partnership for Civic Capacity (NPCC)?<sup>vii</sup> Whatever. The key is to spread the word that people of good will are working together to create positive change and that more help is needed.

### ***What would success look like?***

Success is every community member and organization taking a more active, thoughtful and sustained civic role. For young people graduating from college or high school, it could mean a willingness to forego the fast career or resume-building track to serve their communities through the Peace Corps or the usual array of programs funded by AmeriCorps. But it could also mean taking a more creative and riskier approach to building civic capacity – the example of Freedom Summer and the Freedom Rides leaps to mind.

For the financially secure of whatever age, it would mean a willingness to forego some of our customary luxuries so that, perhaps, one or both spouses can focus on low-paying or unpaid civic activities.

At a deeper level, it's about finding a sense of optimism and energy in all aspects of our lives – physical, mental, social and spiritual; an end to a culture of blaming the other guy or helpless passivity; and a return to a culture of responsibility for ourselves, our communities, our nation, and our world; and it's about a sense of camaraderie. We are, after all, in this together. As the Puritan leader John Winthrop put it in 1630, "We must delight in each other, make others conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body."

The Community Platform is but one example of a practical project to make this vision a reality. But there are more. There are people of good will in communities all across the country doing good work. If we can begin to bring these people working in the nonprofit sector, in business, in government, and as ordinary citizens together, we will change America for the better.

It is, as Dr. King put it, "enormously difficult to know what to do. We must climb the unfamiliar slope of steep mountains, but there is no alternative, no well-trod level path. There will be agonizing setbacks along with creative advances." But "sometimes leadership must begin with nothing more than a question."<sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> A good portion of Obama's appeal in the last election rested on a similar appeal to "rebuild America block by block..." and to transcend the usual political divisions. Although Obama may have failed to deliver, this should in no way undermine the power and practicality of the vision.

<sup>ii</sup> Moynihan framed it slightly different: "The central conservative truth is that culture determines politics. The central liberal truth is that the former can be changed by the latter." My understanding of this quote is that "politics" most certainly implies people exerting political or civic leadership.

<sup>iii</sup> Quote from Nobel Prize-winning economist Elinor Ostrom.

<sup>iv</sup> As David Brooks put it, "People are really good at self-deception. We attend to the facts we like and suppress the ones we don't. We inflate our own virtues and predict we will behave more nobly than we actually do. As Max H. Bazerman and Ann E. Tenbrunsel write in their book, 'Blind Spots,' 'When it comes time to make a decision, our thoughts are dominated by thoughts of how we want to behave; thoughts of how we should behave disappear.'" (New York Times, 11/15/2011)

<sup>v</sup> We recognize that this is a highly controversial idea in the world of major nonprofit organizations. It may prove unnecessary, but my sense is that this simple act of sacrifice provides the moral "fuel" that will lead this effort to succeed while so many other efforts led by major nonprofit organizations fail as funders turn to other interests. "It is not enough to say, 'We must not wage war.' It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it." (MLK, Testament of Hope, p. 629) Or just imagine if Dr. King, John Lewis and other civil rights leaders had done nothing more than talk!

We propose this as a purely voluntary step; to do otherwise would completely undermine the moral power of the act. For a fuller discussion of the pros and cons, see "A Vow of Moderation" available at [\\_\\_\\_](#).

<sup>vi</sup> I'm not sure about the precise language. More action-oriented groups could choose to call themselves "teams;" more reflective groups could choose "circles;" or those who want to keep it simple could simply stick to "group."

<sup>vii</sup> The acronym for National Partnership for Civic Capacity (NPCC) has a nice resonance with SNCC – the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee led during its heyday by John Lewis.

<sup>viii</sup> The first quote is from Martin Luther King, Jr. "Where Do We Go from Here?" page 598. The second quote is from Ronald Heifetz, "Leadership With No Easy Answers."