

Organizing Principle for Small Groups: Shared Responsibility

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Faith and religion offer one set of anchoring concepts but even more central to the goal of Neighborhood Leadership Circles is the idea that people both as individuals and as communities or as a nation as a whole need to take more responsibility for themselves. This theme resonates in general terms across the political spectrum, albeit with liberals emphasizing responsibility for the poor and the environment, social conservatives emphasizing responsibility to family and community, and libertarians emphasizing personal responsibility. My sense is that in the tolerant and “sense-making” environment of a small group in which the complexity of life and our interpretation of it is readily recognized, people with diverse views would come to first respect one another and then to find a common ground of belief, or at least a deeper appreciation of the beliefs of those who differ.

The language of responsibility in US and British politics today

The language of shared civic responsibility resonates deeply with people and can provide an organizing principle around which people of both liberal and conservative leanings can come together in small groups. It’s striking today to hear so much talk of civic responsibility from both the highest officials to “water cooler conversations”:

We hear this language on both the left and right in Britain today. On the left, British Labour Party chief Ed Miliband’s calls for “a new bargain to ensure responsibility from top to bottom.”ⁱ

It’s also behind British Conservative’s Big Society initiative:

“Cameron’s trying to get the British people to change their social norms. Many British governments have effectively said: If you pay your taxes you can sit back and we experts will take care of your problems. The Thatcher government said: Get off your couch and start a business. Cameron says: Get off the couch and take responsibility for your community. Cameron is trying to spark active citizenship.”ⁱⁱ

In the U.S., Obama emphasized it in his 2009 inauguration speech:

“What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility - a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task.”

And Bush was broadly criticized for NOT tapping American’s sense of responsibility and willingness to sacrifice for the common good after 9/11 when he asked Americans to go out and consume.

Conservative pollsters recognize this. (Wash. Post, Jan. 13, 2013) [QUOTE]

Responsibility in Christian and Jewish Traditions

Rick Warren is as explicit in the text of “The Purpose-Driven Life,” which has sold more than 30 million copies, as he is in the book’s title about the focus on larger responsibilities:

“Many Christians misinterpret Jesus’ promise of the “abundant life” to mean perfect health, a comfortable lifestyle, constant happiness, full realization of your dreams, and instant relief from problems through faith and prayer. In a word, they expect the Christian life to be easy. They expect heaven on earth. This self-absorbed perspective treats God as a genie who simply exists to serve you in your selfish pursuit of personal fulfillment.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Never forget that life is not about you! You exist for God’s purposes, not vice versa. Why would God provide heaven on earth when he’s planned the real thing for you in eternity?”^{iv}

Responsibility in Judaism: Tikkun Olam: Repairing the world

Its role in Judaism may be even more prominent than in Christianity:

“We believe that all human beings are created in the image of God, and that we are God’s partners in improving the world. Tikkun olam — repairing the world — is a hallmark of Reform Judaism as we strive to bring peace, freedom and justice to all people.”

- What is Reform Judaism?^v

Alternative Principles from the Left: Power and Engagement

Community organizing projects such as the Industrial Areas Foundation, which use somewhat similar organizing strategies to what we are proposing, focus on building power in low-income communities. This may resonate with community members but creates an “us versus them” zero-sum dynamic with the business establishment, which arguably has the power that organizers wish to secure. Small business has long ranked with the military as one of the most trusted of American institutions.^{vi} Thus, much of the middle class is likely to remain in opposition. At best, framing the problem like this may win short-term victories, but these are often fragile and readily reversed at the next election or first hint of imperfection.

A focus on responsibility frames the problem differently.

- *by Tom Pollak*

ⁱ http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-insiders/post/the-importance-of-storytelling/2011/10/20/gIQAHP9WAM_blog.html#pagebreak

ⁱⁱ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/opinion/20brooks.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=tha212>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Purpose Driven Life. Kindle location 2523-27

^{iv} The Purpose Driven Life. Kindle location 2529-30

^v <http://urj.org/about/reform/whatisreform/> (Retrieved 11/6/2011)

^{vi} See, e.g., Gallup Poll on Confidence in American Institutions (2012)