



The Broader Vision: A Practical Approach for Civic and Educational Transformation



Tom Pollak, Director, Fall 2020

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

Our best hope for thriving communities and a strong democracy in coming decades lies in strengthening the wisdom, compassion, and courage of ordinary people and in building a civic culture where people are more willing to take responsibility for one another and take leadership for the community as a whole.¹ This change in civic culture would have far-reaching impact on both our day-to-day social interactions and in the public sphere.

Can this be done? If so, how? For starters, we need to think longer term and beyond the normal boundaries of political discussion to the lessons of modern psychology, public health, and organization leadership studies and to what we can learn from the Civil Rights Movement about changing culture.² If we are to elect better leaders and successfully enact and implement better public policy for the long term, the public (including people in positions of power) needs a deeper education of head and heart.

A Simple Spiritual and Civic Faith for the 21st Century. The starting point for that deeper education is to recognize the simple spiritual and civic faith that has undergirded the leadership of Lincoln, King, Mandela and countless others:

- We are all connected to one another in deeper ways than we fully understand.
- We need to trust our intuition that we are part of a larger spiritual or "moral universe."
- We need to commit ourselves to a purpose in life beyond ourselves.³

Some may disagree with either the concept, the possibility, or this definition of a shared faith. However, most Americans are likely to agree in principle but find it difficult to put into practice in their own lives. That is our challenge and here's our solution: **We all recognize the vital importance of daily or regular habits for our physical well-being and for academic, athletic or artistic achievement but we seldom**

¹ What are our present barriers to working together as communities and as a nation? Some would find the causes grounded in structural inequality, capitalism, or racism. Others look elsewhere. Pope Francis said we have a "culture of indifference"; Barack Obama spoke about the need to change our "civic culture"; others highlight the economic insecurity of the middle class, which leaves people feeling that they don't have the time to focus on anything but work. Still others highlight the role of capitalism, social media or the epidemic of depression, anxiety and mental health issues that make it hard for people to be proactive and think beyond their own problems. The bottom line: Even if we disagree on the root causes of our "illness," we can still agree on many of the steps we need to take to reach "civic health."

² As political scientist and U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan put it, "The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of society. The central liberal truth is that politics [and leadership] can change a culture and save it from itself." To learn more about the conceptual framework for changing cultures, see, e.g., Heath & Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* (2010) or *Achieving Culture Change: A Policy Framework* by The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (UK, 2008) at https://crawford.anu.edu.au/sparc/pdf/2010/achieving_culture_change.pdf.

³ See <http://www.civicLeadershipProject.org/civic-faith>.

apply these principles to our spiritual and civic lives. Just as it takes alternating periods of vigorous activity and rest to build muscles, so it takes the “stress” of service combined with time for solitude, reflection, and outdoor physical activity to develop the “spiritual and civic muscles” we need:

- **SERVICE:** Become a tutor, mentor or long-term volunteer for a cause you care about — especially if it gets you out of your comfort zone striving toward a big and important goal and working across class, race, and ideology. Communicating positive emotions of kindness, hope, and equanimity is easy when we are in safe professional or personal roles but volunteer service provides an opportunity to put our values to the test, to develop habits of courage and patience, and to develop our leadership skills.
- **SOLITUDE:** Too many people don't make enough time for solitude — reflection, prayer, meditation, journaling — or other practices that help us better understand ourselves and others, focus on what's really important, and expand our awareness, creativity and compassion. How valuable is time for solitude? Nelson Mandela answered, “One of the things that made me long to be back in prison was that I had so little opportunity for reading, thinking and quiet reflection after my release.”⁴
- **OUTDOOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY:** Get outdoors and go for a walk, a run, a bike ride, or maybe a swim to kindle the sense of hope and the energy we need to deal with the challenges we face as individuals and as a society. There's a wealth of scientific evidence that repetitive exercise – and especially when outdoors -- increases our feel-good endorphins, reduces depression and anxiety, and helps us to focus on what's important, ignore minor nuisances, and be more creative.⁵
- **STUDY AND REFLECTION:** Solitude, outdoor exercise, and service provide an “education of the heart,” but we need an education of the mind, too. We all need to do more systematic and holistic study and thinking about the possibilities and limitations of human nature, where we are as a country and as humankind, and how we as individuals can make a practical and positive impact in the world. Modern psychology, history, and the study of the civic and moral ideals of both Western and Eastern intellectual and spiritual traditions give us ample food for thought and a range of recent works (and spin-off TED Talks and videos) are accessible to average American readers.⁶ Mandela again frames our intellectual starting point: “We can build a

⁴ See <http://www.civicleadershipproject.org/solitude>.

⁵ See <http://www.civicleadershipproject.org/exercise> and <http://civicLeadershipProject.org/outdoors>. Looking beyond the scientific evidence, Linda Douty sums up my own experience of 13 years of daily bike commuting through miles of woods on the outskirts of DC: “[T]he motion of the tides, the cleansing of a rainstorm, the dormancy of winter—all remind us that a force greater than ourselves turns the clock of this universe. Nature immerses us in that power.” The faith in something greater than oneself that this experience teaches has been critical in my efforts to stay focused on a path that seems true to me but outside conventional norms or ideas.

⁶ See <http://dctutormentor.org/docs/student-curriculum-2017-v1.pdf>

society grounded on friendship and our common humanity...That is the only road open to us.” Our challenge as individuals is to understand ourselves, each other, and our world and to think strategically about what role we can best play to make a positive difference.

Our Work: Practical Civic and Educational Transformation

To recap: In the short term, politics matters. But in the long term, we need to create a movement to build a stronger civic culture if we are to elect better leaders, enact better policies, and weave a civic fabric of empathy, hope and wisdom through our actions large and small.

The DC Tutoring & Mentoring Initiative (DCTMI)⁷ starts by getting people working together across class, race and ideology to tackle our shared civic challenges – starting with the transformation of education for low-income students. More broadly, each of our three core programs – DCTMI volunteer outreach, CivicFest, and our Civic Leadership programs – are intended to be practical approaches to launch people toward fulfilling lives and impactful engagement in their communities. Each focuses on one or two of the four practices described above and each can serve as a gateway to the others:

DC Tutoring & Mentoring Initiative (DCTMI): A Shared Long-Term Goal

More than 2 out of 3 DC students – 60,000 kids – are reading below grade level. More have other academic or non-academic needs. Our teams of interns and community volunteers talk to community members at farmers markets and public events and spaces around the city about the immense need for more volunteers and about the importance of ordinary people getting more involved if we are to make a better world. Over the past three years, we have signed up more than 1,800 people – most to become tutors or mentors but some merely to keep abreast of our work or to volunteer at a later time. (Getting people to follow-through remains a challenge.) People who sign up to volunteer are matched with one of our 40+ partner tutoring and mentoring organizations and schools. We also work with individual volunteers to help us connect to their employers, religious congregations, universities, and their other personal networks. (See <http://dcTutorMentor.org> for videos and more.) If 5-10% of adults in the DC Metro area got involved, we could transform education.

CivicFest: Get inspired. Get active. Get involved.

Our annual CivicFest, held in 2018 and 2019, drew hundreds of DC residents each year to DC’s Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park and combined music, dance, workshops, yoga, conversations by local nonprofits looking for volunteers and participants, community, and nature with the goal of reawakening our sense of hope in our ability to work together to make a better world. CivicFest brought together nonprofits

⁷ DCTMI is the main program of the 501(c)(3) Civic Leadership Project, Inc., which also includes the Form 990 Online (our primary source of revenue) and the Community Platform Project, a web-based tool for helping community foundations, universities, and other community organizations map the nonprofits and assets in their communities in relationship to community needs.

spanning a wide range of activities talking about their work from arts and the environment to youth development and civic engagement. In 2018, we were also visited by a special guest, Superman's long lost brother, CivicMan, who joined us to save the world from apathy and indifference – and because there's room for play and humor in the serious work of making a better world! In 2019, we created the "Canopy of Hope" hands-on art project and added an array of workshops. (Learn more at <http://civicFest.us>.)

Civic Leadership Certificate and Fellows Programs: An Education for the Head and Heart

The **Civic Leadership Certificate Program** combines six evening sessions and 10 hours canvassing at farmers markets and public events and spaces to develop the skills we need to make a positive impact in our careers and in our lives while helping us build the team of thoughtful, energetic, emotionally intelligent, and effective leaders we need to make a better world. The program includes a variety of short readings and videos, the experience of talking to strangers about our values, and plenty of time for "walking reflection" and deep conversation. (<http://dctutormentor.org/leadership/>)

The **Civic Leadership Fellows program** offers a 13-session in-depth intellectual grounding in the social science and civic values undergirding our approach to creating a better world. The course is intended for undergraduates or those wanting to learn more about the intellectual foundations of our work: Topics include political philosophy (with a modern pragmatic civic republican/humanist focus), positive psychology, social psychology, leadership theory, racism and inequality, modern education reform, and the history of American social movements (especially the Civil Rights Movement). We complement the intellectual work with daily practices of exercise and solitude as well. (<http://dctutormentor.org/docs/student-curriculum-2017-v1.pdf>.)

New Projects: The Ripple App and Bodhisattva Saturday Mornings

The Ripple App⁸ is intended to be the "Fitbit" for civic engagement. People need to develop their "moral muscles and civic skills" each day if we are to develop a larger cadre of people willing and able to take responsibility for fighting racism and making a better world. The App lets a user check off activities to Educate Yourself, Center Yourself, Take Action in Your Everyday Life, Take Collective Action, and Connect with other like-minded people. By spending time each day, tracking our efforts and our progress, and sharing it with others, we learn to act with greater wisdom and compassion to make a better world. The app can be used online at <https://rippleApp.org> or can be downloaded from the Android app store and (soon) from the Apple store as well.

⁸ Why "Ripple"? We were inspired by Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 speech: "It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is thus shaped. Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, they sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

In August, 2020 we began weekly ***Bodhisattva Saturday Mornings*** by the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. A “Bodhisattva” is a person devoted to developing the wisdom and compassion needed to act for the benefit of all. As with the Ripple App, our goal is to build a community of practical idealists – of bodhisattvas – who support one another and develop our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits to be the best leaders we can be — regardless of our formal position. This is our local effort to see what we can accomplish. Our small group has been meeting every Saturday from 8-9:30 for a solitary walking/jogging, walking with a partner to get to know each other and discuss the week’s theme, and closing with meditation, prayer or reflection (each person can choose what works for them). Learn more at <https://www.dctutormentor.org/saturday-mornings/> or come on out and join us!

The Next Phase of Our Work: Implementing a Comprehensive Communications Strategy

One of our goals over the next year is to find funding, marketing, and other partners that share our long-term goal to change our civic culture. Our progress has been slow but steady. However, we feel we understand enough to begin scaling our work. Like successful public health campaigns or the gay marriage equality campaign, our goal is to help people change their attitudes, values and behavior over the long term. If you share our vision and see opportunities to work together to do so, please let us know!

Want to Learn More?

How do you prefer to learn? You can begin with short videos, 2-6 page concept papers, or longer documents that delve into the social science and the details:

Documents

Links to key documents can be found on our website under Resources, Key Resources or directly at <http://www.dctutormentor.org/resources/key-dctmi-resources/>

The social science and “civic philosophy” behind our work: <http://www.dctutormentor.org/docs/soc-sci-weighing-the-evidence-2016-10.pdf>

Civic Leadership Fellows Program Syllabus and Introduction: <http://dctutormentor.org/docs/student-curriculum-2017-v1.pdf>

Civic Leadership: Organizing Our Lives and Developing the Habits of Mind and Heart to Make a Better World - <http://dctutormentor.org/docs/dctmi-supp-pamphlet-v6-leadership.pdf>

Videos

<http://www.dctutormentor.org/video/> - Four 1-2 minute videos that provide an overview of the project, the experience of canvassers, and the need for help in DC.

A 23-minute introduction to our “civic canvassing” approach is at <https://youtu.be/u2wTyBtqpcQ>.

Background

The DC Tutoring & Mentoring is the primary program of the 501(c)(3) Civic Leadership Project, Inc., which was incorporated in the summer of 2016. More information on Tom Pollak’s background can be found here:

<https://generationtogenesis.org/stories/tom-pollak/> - a short blog post on starting DCTMI for the Generation-to-Generation project of Encore.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/tom-pollak-8771216/> - LinkedIn profile