

NETWORKS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Throughout history, the well-functioning community has derived much of its coherence, its capacity to adapt and its stability from a network of influential, responsible, mutually-acquainted individuals who shared a rough consensus concerning the community's basic values and came to the fore when those values were threatened. Historically, those whom the world identified as "leaders" depended heavily upon such networks.

But over the course of history those stabilizing guarantors of community well-being were often not of the sort that we could or would find acceptable today. Generally, they were homogeneous and discriminatory: — an aristocratic class, a military class, a priesthood, wealthy families linked by intermarriage—or some combination thereof.

We have put all of that irrevocably behind us, and in our country today one cannot possibly envision a rebirth of stability under such auspices.

And yet every community needs—no less now than in the past—*some kind* of stabilizing network of influential, responsible, mutually-acquainted members.

No one will argue with the word "responsible," but "influential" and "mutually acquainted" stir memories of past power elites, so clarification is in order. To be tolerable today "influential" must not mean that the individual is wealthy, patrician or a member of an exclusive ruling circle. It must refer to individuals who have won the trust and respect of their peers through serious efforts in behalf of the community.

"Mutually acquainted" must not refer to members of a closed group—the network must be open. The Phrase must refer to the fact that individuals

who reflect the diversity of the community have come to relate to one another with understanding and respect.

But why do I seem to be speaking of a special group within the community rather than just speaking of the whole community? The answer is that a group within the community emerges. That is a wholly comfortable thought to the populist enchanted with the idea of the old New England Town Meeting and wanting to imagine something approaching 100% attendance.

In a thoroughly healthy community a very high percentage of members (perhaps over 90%) may have shared goals and values and because of that may lend enormous strength to the group (e.g. by rearing their children with the same goals and values.) But when one sets even modest standards of responsible participation beyond voting, e.g., knowing the issues facing the community, engaging in serious dialogue on differences of opinion, helping work toward consensus—the percentage drops off dramatically. People are busy, and caught up in their own problems. Some are low in energy. Some are simply not gripped by their community responsibilities.

So . . . consistent attention to the well-being of the community must fall to a certain number of men and women who are highly motivated and who are trusted by the community at large. They are “the responsables.” One can’t put a number on them. If a catastrophic earthquake or tornado were to strike the city the number might be quite high. Under normal circumstances it is less high. It will vary from one city to the next. We need not seek precise estimates. The point is that within the total population of the community there is a smaller number who are in fact the strengtheners and stabilizers of the whole enterprise.

Obviously, many of our communities have in the fairly recent past benefitted by the presence of responsible, caring citizens. But typically they have been a mix of prominent families and business or professional leaders, very much in the old Establishment mold. As social disintegration has proceeded, these remnants of the old Establishments have lost confidence in their leadership role. And non-Establishment groups no longer accept such leadership when it is offered.

Citizens who merit the label “responsibles” still exist but they come from very diverse segments of a deeply fragmented city. To function as an effective network for the community they must find one another, listen to one another, explore shared goals and values, and develop the mutual trust that makes common action possible.

The resulting “network of responsibility” doesn’t fit familiar ways of thinking. Some populists think of the only legitimate group as “everybody”—and this is not everybody. When people hear words like “influential, responsible, mutually acquainted” they think Establishment. But this is not the Establishment. It’s something new that can only come out of prolonged community efforts to bring people of all segments into fruitful communication.

A network of responsibility is bipartisan. It has no official status, and nothing but its own moral authority to undergird its leadership. It does not lead through economic power, and has no intention of seizing political power. It does not represent any one set of special interests. It does not have a listed or defined membership. It does not act as a body.

Fortunately, in creating the new networks, we are not writing on a blank slate. There are in every community influential individuals who are almost universally perceived as trustworthy, steady, fair and consistent. And

in a good many communities, some of these individuals have already formed mutually trusting relationships across ethnic, economic, occupational, religious and geographical boundaries. Such alliances are not comprehensive enough to be counted as a solution to our problem, but they are steps in the right direction.

In the late 1960s, early 1970s, some cities formed local urban coalitions that did in fact enlist influential leaders from every segment. But they were forged in response to the urban riots of the late 60s, and when the riots ended most of the local coalitions lost their steam. Still, they proved that something could happen.

More recently, the National Civic League and other groups have had considerable experience in helping cities to bring their various segments into effective communication.

Without being dogmatic about it, I am going to suggest a series of steps.

The first step is to launch a series of community-wide public discussions involving all segments of the community—all parts of town, all ethnic groups, all religious elements, all economic levels. The participants need not be official representatives of their segments of the community.

The first several meetings might be devoted to an informal review of major problems of the community. The true objective at this early stage is to let all the diverse segments come to know one another and to learn the art of communicating across cultural boundaries.

Then they can begin to talk about goals and priorities, preferably with a 10 to 15 year time perspective. Where do we want our city to be by the year 2010? It's not enough to review miscellaneous problems: the city as a whole and its future must come into focus.

The group will need a research unit. They can create task forces to examine specific issues in depth.

Gradually and invisibly out of such discussions would come a reservoir of individuals—influential in all the diverse segments, used to talking across boundaries, thoroughly accustomed to feeling responsible for the city's future. There would never be a roster of such individuals. No one would be "in" or "out." But the reservoir would be there. Out of it leaders will emerge, but the development and introduction of such leaders is not its *raison d'être*. Its function is to stabilize and strengthen the leaders, to firm up the sense of community, and to establish a tradition of continuing public discourse on community issues.

It will not define itself as an action committee. If there is sufficiently lively support for its recommendations, commissions should be appointed to pursue the possibilities of action.

A word of caution: all social arrangements tend to rigidify, and despite all its looseness and deliberate lack of structure, the network of responsibility will inevitably be subject to that tendency. Extraordinary measures would have to be taken to honor nonviolent dissent and to keep the network refreshed with younger members.

How much easier it would be to describe if the network fit some familiar formula. If we said "What every city needs is a bipartisan 100 person commission on the future," people would understand, whether or not they agreed.

But our goal is to build something much longer-term, much more fundamental to the life of the community. It is a daunting task. Homogeneous communities are more easily created and maintained, but we

rule that out. In our networks of responsibility we deliberately seek a diversity that reflects the heterogeneity in the community.

The stabilizing core of traditional communities formed slowly over generations. We have to form a stabilizing core starting tomorrow.

Can it be done? It *has* to be done. There is no other path to social cohesion or to community stability. It is a task to be measured in decades. Quick fixes won't do it. It isn't like a 3-5 year project to develop a new job training program. It's a long-term effort to bring a disintegrating society back to health.

The Chinese say "There is a time to dry your nets and a time to cast your nets." This is a time to cast your nets.