

**No Better Time:
Advancing the Work of Deliberative Democracy¹**

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July 9, 2009

On behalf of the UNH community, welcome to Durham. Thank you for making the commitment of time and scarce resources to join your colleagues at this gathering of community organizers, faculty, academic administrators, students, national organization leaders, foundation officers, and others who share a deep commitment to strengthening democratic practice. We are honored that you chose to be one of the 270 individuals who answered our call, who recognize that there is no better time than now to advance this work through deliberate and deliberative processes.

Many of our conversations at this meeting are focused on the context of the deliberative democracy movement. The conference title captures our sense that we are in the midst of a convergence of political, social, and economic forces that both require and facilitate greater citizen engagement in local and national governance. And there is a growing recognition that democratic governance is much more encompassing than that which occurs in formal electoral bodies and regulatory agencies. Democratic governance also means local citizen action focused on matters that are not amenable to policy writing or rule making. As we know from the experience of organizations like Everyday Democracy, participation in democratic processes also can change the ways that people interact with each other at the street level. Sustained, facilitated

¹ Remarks presented at No Better Time: Promising Opportunities in Deliberative Democracy for Educators and Practitioners, University of New Hampshire, July 2009. (www.unh.edu/democracy/conference2009) Bruce Mallory is Professor of Education, UNH, and chair of the board of directors, The Democracy Imperative.

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dialogue can alter human relationships, create a sense of self-determination and hope in neglected communities, help young people acquire democratic habits of heart and mind, and shape the destiny of neighborhoods and municipalities.

So we know that sustained, deliberative practices work, and we know that there is a growing interest in such practices to address complex social problems and to increase citizen participation in governance. But I believe that what we don't know yet is whether this will all stick. Historically, our society has been fickle. We seem to have a national case of attention deficit disorder, in which our interests, our inclinations, our commitments easily shift from one event to the next, from crisis to crisis, from Iran to Michael Jackson, from Katrina to Kabul. We are heartened that the last national election drew such high levels of voter participation, especially among younger citizens, but we have no notion of whether that will continue. Our public schools are still failing urban youth, our health care system is still not accessible to tens of millions of Americans, and our elected leaders too often succumb to the corrupting temptations of power and privilege.

My question, then, is whether we can claim that this is truly a movement, a term we typically reserve for massive, sustained, paradigm-shifting events such as the civil rights movement or the anti-globalization movement. To put this question into context, I will draw on the framework developed by Paul Hawken in his 2007 book titled *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World*. Hawken's book focuses on the convergence of small, disparate efforts around the globe aimed at enhancing human rights, social and economic justice, and environmental sustainability. He

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catalogues tens of thousands of NGO's, ad hoc community-based efforts, and government-sponsored initiatives that have historically operated separately around these topics and suggests that their potential convergence is creating the largest social movement in history. I think that his arguments are useful for thinking about where the movement for a more deliberative democracy is headed.

In describing the movement toward environmental justice, Hawken raises questions that are pertinent for us. He notes that, “This movement . . . doesn’t fit the standard model. It is dispersed, inchoate, and fiercely independent. It has no manifesto or doctrine, no overriding authority to check with. It is taking shape in schoolrooms, farms, jungles, villages, companies, deserts, fisheries, slums—and yes, even fancy New York hotels. One of its distinctive features is that it is tentatively emerging as a global humanitarian movement arising from the bottom up. . . . Rather than a movement in the conventional sense, could it be an instinctive, collective response to threat? Is it atomized for reasons that are innate to its purpose? How does it function? How fast is it growing? How is it connected? Why is it largely ignored? Does it have a history? Can it successfully address the issues that governments are failing to: energy, jobs, conservation, poverty, and global warming? Will it become centralized, or will it continue to be dispersed and cede its power to ideologies and fundamentalism?”

Using words that we might find familiar to our own work in deliberative democratic practice, Hawken declares, “Healing the wounds of the earth and its people does not require saintliness or a political party, only gumption and persistence. It is not a liberal or conservative activity; it is a sacred act. It is a massive enterprise undertaken by ordinary citizens everywhere,

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not by self-appointed governments or oligarchies.” I think we can recognize these core ingredients of gumption and persistence among ourselves. Those of us who participate in, support, study, and teach deliberative democracy understand that it is sustained, messy, non-linear, ad hoc work that often is necessary for real change to occur at the community level. Thus, it is hard to measure, difficult to replicate in any precise manner, and therefore challenging to convince public and private sponsors of the value of investing in such work.

And our movement is very caught up in the effort to be non-partisan, to be politically and socially inclusive, even while many of us who commit ourselves to the work of deliberative democracy are aligned with social change agendas associated with the left. Yet we work hard to distinguish between progressive ideals—that is efforts to help the country progress toward its fundamental democratic values as articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the preamble of the Constitution—and progressive causes that are often redistributive and grounded in liberation ideology. Jefferson knew that he was part of designing an audacious, on-going experiment that entrusted the people rather than the aristocracy. It is that ideal of an informed, active citizenry that we wish to advance, not merely a political agenda that favors one policy or one interest group over another.

This brings us to the challenge of advancing process—sustained dialogue, for example—vs. advancing solutions. This is a constant tension in our work, and we are often challenged to explain this distinction to others who are skeptical of what our real agenda might be. Again, I think that Hawken captures this distinction well. “In contrast to the ideological struggles currently dominating global events and personal identity, a broad non-ideological movement has

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come into being that does not invoke the masses' fantasized will but rather engages citizens' localized needs. This movement's key contribution is the rejection of one big idea in order to offer in its place thousands of practical and useful ones. Instead of isms it offers processes, concerns, and compassion. The movement demonstrates a pliable, resonant, and generous side of humanity. It does not aim for the utopian, which itself is just another ism, but is eminently pragmatic. . . . If the movement in all its diversity has a common dream, it is process—in a word, democracy, but not the democracy practiced and corrupted by corporations and modern nation-states. It is, rather, a re-imagination of public governance emerging from place, culture, and people. What binds its constituents is a modus operandi that could be called the autonomy of diversity. Groups with varying outlooks and discrete goals cooperate on key issues without subordinating themselves to another group.”

Hawken acknowledges that, “This may sound ethereal but it is in fact the essence of praxis, the application of grassroots democracy in a violent and exploitative age.” He quotes the poet Adrienne Rich:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed
I have cast my lot with those
who, age after age, perversely
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

Those of us at this gathering do not claim extraordinary power or unique capacities or insights. Many of us come out of other movements—for civil rights, for peace, for social justice, for safer, cleaner neighborhoods, for a healthier planet. Our experiences have taught us that absolutism, elitism, and narrow ideologies do not advance the cause or attract new converts. Rather, we have learned to listen, to include diverse points of view, to search for common ground, to find consensus with those whom we might otherwise label as the “other.”

What we have carried with us over the years, the most important ism, is democratic idealism. We are committed above all to the principles of equal access to the table, to an equal say for every citizen, to providing the tools of deliberation so that all citizens, regardless of income or race or gender, can bring their good ideas and energies to the challenges of living in community. Yes, we believe that democratic communities are just communities; being at the table, entering the polling booth are not enough. We also must have the same opportunities and be valued in the same way that everyone else is who comes to the table and enters the polling booth. We believe that so far, these democratic ideals are not fully realized because there are many among us who cannot even get to the table, let alone be heard once they get there. So we strive to create new mechanisms, the next form of democracy, as Matt has articulated it so well, to assure full and meaningful participation in both ad hoc and formal governance processes. We are “small d” democrats even as we acknowledge that most of us in this room believe in the audacity of Barack Obama and his vision for a just and peaceful world. We are encouraged by the President’s commitment to open government and public engagement, even as we are not yet sure of how it will play out and whether it will succeed.

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There is no better time than now. We are both creating and participating in a movement that is much larger than those who are in this room. Paul Aicher always wondered if his vision for citizen-based participatory democracy, in the form of study circles and other kinds of deliberation, was becoming a movement. If he were alive today, I think he would see a lot of evidence that it is. But it is not a monolithic, ideological movement that distinguishes its adherents from an opposition. It is a movement of gumption and persistence, of both process and substance, of ordinary power, that seeks to create a more just and democratic world. I am proud that the University of New Hampshire has been a venue for one piece of this movement over the past two years. I will be prouder when we can name hundreds of universities and colleges along with thousands of community-based organizations as part of the movement. We are getting there; I have no doubt. Thank you again for being here now, for devoting yourselves to this work and its democratic ideals, for being a citizen in the fullest sense of the term.

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