

'Real Men' Don't Do Government?

Women tend to understand the social contract

The political season is upon us, and for many of us the task at hand is to insist that President Obama find his voice. My greater concern, however, is that there may be a diminishing audience for an active government and nation-building right here at home.

Having spent nearly 35 years in the classroom — mostly teaching law students and occasionally undergraduates — I sense a disturbing resurgence of references to government in the third person — and not in a nice way. All too often, government is “them,” some evil outside force. And, of course, if it’s the enemy, the smaller the better.

Polls, as well as my anecdotal experience, suggest that far more men than women — whether of my generation or my students’ generation — are drawn to this small-government libertarianism, currently popularized by Ron and Rand Paul. Most of these men describe themselves as socially liberal, fiscally conservative (translation: the right to smoke weed after work while ignoring the jobless folks across town) and often apolitical. Though they might not actually vote for Congressman Paul (or vote at all), their view of life as an individual endeavor seems to be the cultural norm. The ongoing task of finding a reasonable balance between individual rights and community responsibility rarely draws their attention. And gender seems to be playing a part.

Consider, for example, that so many “successful” older men regard their material comforts to be the result of individual talent, wholly ignoring the considerable benefits of societal support, inherited privileges, the opportunities provided by middle-class upbringings and just plain good luck. Accomplished women, on the other hand, rarely subscribe to such self-serving silliness and seem to value a more holistic approach to life’s challenges and successes, even in the face of blatant gender-stereotyping. Recall the last presidential campaign when candidate Obama was belittled as a former “community organizer” (by the ever-provocative Sarah Palin, among others, to the delight of too many white male voters) and the subsequent criticism leveled at empathy-burdened Supreme Court nominees: illogical, irrational, non-linear, emotional, weak ... feminine.

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My favorite political candidate of the day is law professor and consumer advocate Elizabeth Warren, who is running a strong campaign for the Senate seat once sought unsuccessfully by Mitt “The-99-percent-is-Just-Envious” Romney. Her remarks on the campaign trail have been widely reported:

There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody. You built a factory out there, good for you. But, I want to be clear: You moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate. You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. You didn't have to worry that marauding bands would come and seize everything at your factory and hire someone to protect against this because of the work the rest of us did. Now look, you built a factory and it turned into something terrific or a great idea. God bless. Keep a big hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.

Yes, the social contract. And pay forward. Small-government, free-market advocates need to “man up” in ways that matter. For more than a decade, many of us in the legal academy and elsewhere have warned that the unprecedented disparity of wealth in our nation is a real

and dangerous threat to our democracy.

When the wealthiest 20 percent of Americans own 85 percent of our privately held wealth (and the top 1 percent owns 35 percent), when the average income of our richest 1 percent is 36 times greater than that of the median U.S. household, and when this 1 percent finances unencumbered PACs and determines elections, our peaceful democracy is tempting fate. On a human level, this wealth disparity breeds separate lives. Our paths never cross. Out of sight, out of mind.

In the 2011 Quality of Life Index — weighing factors such as health, education, public safety, fiscal responsibility — the U.S. ranks 31st, well behind those countries that choose to devote greater resources to their infrastructures. Once again, where’s the social contract?

Sadly, so many young men seem to be on that familiar solo track we disavowed in the cultural revolution of our youth. We must remind ourselves that our relationship with government mirrors the relationships we maintain in our everyday lives. “The personal is political,” remember? What ever became of the “men’s movement” of the 1970s, which built upon that latest wave of women’s liberation and on which we held out such hope for transforming gender roles — where we sought to find honest, one-on-one relationships with other men, equality of responsibility in our family life, engagement in our neighborhoods and our children’s schools, inspiration in our workplaces, and thoughtful participation in our government’s programs and priorities? Can it be, as one female friend has suggested, that we simply can’t overcome these intractable gender differences — whether nature or nurture, the barriers are just too great?

Sometimes small experiments can help me understand. When I pose to my students a hypothetical new society on a desert island — 30 of us, or 50, or 200, however many of us are in the class — and ask what our rules (constitution) are going to be, we seem able to settle on what we expect from one another and, men and women alike, that we’re

not simply going to let that other fellow a few seats over, through bad habits and/or ill fortune, fall into the gutter and stay there.

Predictably, however, as we move from full-engagement (on a desert island or in small communities) to a representative democracy (because our town has become too large for us all to meet and debate in the local amphitheatre), as “local” gets lost, we find many of our voices (usually baritones) condemning government as “them,” a frame of reference which affords us the luxury of denying responsibility and wallowing in judgment and sanctimony. The larger and more diverse the community to whom we can pass the buck, the quicker we can disassociate ourselves from those whom we don’t know and aren’t inclined to know. (It’s all the harder, of course, in a purposefully heterogeneous society, our Great Salad Bowl experiment, unique among democratic nations, where we seek to demonstrate that people from all cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds can live together peacefully and productively. Inspiring, to be sure, but enormously difficult each and every day.) If we can create distance and imagine differences, we can rationalize our self-centered behavior. It’s easier than engagement, and a quicker route to “getting mine.”

Combining our tendency toward sanctimony with the bystander syndrome — when we silently acquiesce to an ill-advised war pursued overseas in our name (and during which



most of us sacrifice virtually nothing ourselves) or to a money-driven system which has allowed a deviant football coach to roam undeterred in a powerful and privileged culture which many of us support from the comfort of our couches every Saturday afternoon — we can spare ourselves any sense of responsibility and principled action.

Teenagers — mostly girls, it seems — love that painfully clichéd slogan (on mugs, T-shirts, bracelets — you can shop for it online!) attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: “Be the change you want to see in the world.” There’s wisdom there, of course. In my day, it was “the personal is political,” now a helpful reminder to us aging progressives who may succumb to hypocrisy in our less public lives. To be sure, every so often we all stumble along the way, looking out for number one at the expense of family, friends, our community, our nation and faceless fellow travelers worldwide. We find ourselves asleep at the switch, only to discover that our attention to self and to community is way out of balance — that we’re not living as we would want the world to be.

Consider, for example, the just-graduated young man who may be setting forth into the world of, say, business or law. Predictably, deregulation, lower taxes and right-to-work laws may hold a certain appeal for him, but more personally — and more significantly, I believe — he does not intend, nor even consider, that starting a family will impact the timing or trajectory of his career path. He envisions an uninterrupted, linear career path, assuming without much thought, I suppose, that “the wife” will keep the home fires burning, Romney-style. On the other hand, my female students — often brilliant, self-assured and career-minded themselves — seem quite conscious of the potential interruption and requisite balancing act when children enter the picture. Can it be, as one female friend has suggested, that we simply can’t overcome these intractable gender differences — whether nature or nurture, the barriers are just too great?

We might ask ourselves if we’re just looking out for number one at the expense of our community when we choose to enroll our kids in private elementary and secondary schools that are out-of-reach, financially and/or geographically, for families of modest means. Or when one “beats the taxman” with undeclared income or dinner out as a “business expense.” Or when we slyly remodel our home without complying with our community’s agreed-upon permit process. Or when one chuckles over a secret extramarital adventure with a neighbor’s wife?

To the young men who have been fortunate to have the privilege of a college education comes both opportunity and responsibility to choose work that matters and, as the counselors say, to live a life worth living. And there’s nothing more noble than public service, where one can express the bedrock American values of equality, inclusion and community. With our infrastructure collapsing all around us, its most essential feature — the foundation of our democracy and an informed electorate, our nation’s beacon to the world — remains our government-funded schools. So, fellas, how about a career teaching in our disadvantaged public schools? Face it: Most of today’s kids in low-income schools don’t have a chance without you.

Yes, boys will be boys — tough, rebellious, independent, bulging biceps. But as men we can choose to grow up, reminding ourselves that what we want for ourselves and for the next generation is the experience of face-to-face engagement, of making meaningful contributions and of sharing real friendships (not simply on Facebook!) next door and across the globe. In a participatory democracy, doing government is doing relationship on a macro level. Through public service, we create and maintain community. Government is we. Guys included. **EW**

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