

Re-weaving the social fabric
Nonviolent public work and the commonwealth
Harry C. Boyte, PPUMC, January 26, 2020
(Revised with feedback from a leader of the Nehemiah homes effort).

To set the stage, let me express appreciation to Chris and our church for inviting discussions about nonviolence this month of celebrations for Martin Luther King. As you know, nonviolence was a centerpiece of King's ministry and mission. Work was another theme, not nearly as widely known. In my sermon two weeks ago, I described the meaning of nonviolence. Today I connect nonviolence with work of public value.

Last year, in a sermon on dignity of work, I described the joy which the people of Israel felt in the work of building the tabernacle in the wilderness. "All the Israelite men and women were eager to contribute something for the work that the Lord had commanded," reads Exodus. This year's passage about the story points to another dimension: The woman came as a group. "All the skilled women brought what they had spun." And it suggests that "what the Lord had commanded" was a common touchstone of their life, central to the commonwealth of Israel.

As the husband of a dedicated knitter, I am constantly impressed with the way the work of knitting can weave a social fabric and also suggest the creation of common things, from conversations to beautiful tapestries displayed in public. Each week Marie and Linda Gesling's knitters group meets in different homes and discusses things, large and small, as they knit. Knitting can also create civic centers with similar functions, like the store called Lila and Clauden in the Twin Cities. For years, Kirsten, the owner, organized gatherings where people discussed issues both public and private. It reminded me of the drug store of Hubert Humphrey's father. He was a citizen pharmacist, whose life work was creating a civic space in the little town of Doland, South Dakota, where he was one of five Democrats in a community with hundreds of Republicans. Tom Sengupta, our local druggist for many years, modeled his work on Humphrey's father.

I call this nonviolent public work. I want to make the case that such effort can address fraying social relationships and renew the commonwealth. The occasion of this sermon is a new project which Marie and I are beginning with a number of state universities, members of the American Democracy Project. Our project is called the Citizen Professional Initiative. It aims to prepare professionals like Kirsten and Hubert Humphrey senior or teachers who create free spaces in our youth empowerment initiative, Public Achievement, people whose work is not simply to dispense wool or pills or information but to build up communities. We're beginning this spring with listening sessions at five state universities in Minnesota. Today, I sketch the crisis which the Citizen Professional effort addresses and describe three ways nonviolent public work can help re-weave the social fabric.

The crisis

Robert Putnam's famous book, *Bowling Alone*, in 2000 captured what I see as the problem behind every other problem we face: more people were bowling but by themselves. Bowling leagues were in sharp decline. He cites data from the [General Social Survey](#) that shows decline in membership of all kinds of civic organizations, from PTAs to religious congregations. Americans know neighbors less, meet with friends less frequently, and even socialize with families less often. Putnam

calls civic and social relationships social capital. In the intervening years, social capital has further eroded.¹ A recent article in *Psychology Today* describes an *epidemic* of loneliness. Jean Twenge found that growing loneliness among young people is tied to replacement of face-to-face relationships with online activity. When compared to teenagers in earlier decades, Gen Z are less likely to "get together with friends in person, go to parties, go out with friends, date, ride in cars for fun, go to shopping malls, or go to the movies."² Platforms like Facebook lead people to curate their public image to project an idealized version of themselves. The more they do so the more they fear human interaction. As one researcher, Jennifer Cline, puts it, "These young adults [she talked with] acknowledged...being 'out of practice' created a vicious cycle in which lack of social competence led to greater dependence on social media use."³

In his Mandela Day Lecture in South Africa, on July 17, 2018, Barack Obama described the same problem as the motivation for his work after his presidency. "I believe in Nelson Mandela's vision of equality and justice and freedom and multi-racial democracy, built on the premise that all people are created equal and they're endowed by our creator with inalienable rights," he said. He also warned, "A politics of fear and resentment and retrenchment... now on the move... ..:" A couple of years ago, I brought Lynn Taliento, the strategist who helped Obama design his foundation, to meet with a group of college presidents. She said she had suggested issue after issue to the president for the foundation's focus – racism, climate change, human rights, inequality, and others. Each time he crossed it off. He said, unless we repair the social fabric, we won't be able to address any other issue.

Partisan differences are inflamed by technologies which demonize opponents. The left as well as the right contributes. More parents worry that their children will marry someone of a different party than that their children will marry someone of a different race.⁴ Moreover, both left and right have largely forgotten the "commonwealth," created and sustained by the people, once a touchstone of Minnesota political culture. What can be done?

Nonviolent public work

The main method that people use to address social unravelling, declining social capital, is through increasing service and volunteer opportunities. For instance, an enormous movement has developed in schools to give students service opportunities, aimed at teaching responsibilities, not simply rights. It is important, but not enough to reweave the social fabric and rebuild a sense of the commonwealth we all have responsibility for. Let me give three examples of nonviolent public work which reweave the social fabric and rebuild a commonwealth consciousness.

Dignified work with public purpose

The first is affirming the importance of every kind of work which builds up humanity. This was a key to the power of the civil rights movement. As I described two weeks ago, Martin Luther King drew on the theological philosophy of personalism which stresses the inviolable and sacred value of each person. Personalism emphasizes education which activates one's potential to contribute to our common life.⁵ And work is a crucial way human worth is expressed and human potential to contribute is activated.

In Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968, during the strike of garbage workers, King argued passionately for the dignity of work. "The person who pick up garbage is as crucial to the health of

society as is the doctor,” he said. “So often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in the so-called big jobs. Let me say to you tonight, that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity it has dignity and it has worth.”

As I described in our Lenten Devotional, I learned a similar lesson about the power of people claiming the value of their work in college. Oliver Harvey, the janitor at Duke who was organizing a union, framed organizing of the maids and janitors for better treatment by stressing the value and importance of their work to the university’s educational mission. Nonacademic employees needed fair treatment, decent wages, and better working conditions, he said, to contribute their talents to Duke. Highly charged discussions and debates about nonacademic employees and the union spilled out of classrooms into countless conversations. The year after I left Duke, King’s assassination precipitated a nonviolent vigil by more than a thousand students to support the organizing effort. The vigil’s dignified demeanor contrasted with many acts of violence of young people around the world that year. The trustees recognized the union and took a step toward affirming the dignity and value of nonacademic employees’ work.

Work that bridges bitter differences

Scholars who talk about decline of social capital have pointed to a downside of community strength: communities may have internal cohesion – bonding social capital - but this can easily fuel hostility toward other communities. To respond, Robert Putnam and others have advanced the idea of “bridging social capital,” linkages between different communities as well as “bonding social capital.” This is used to mean experiences like deliberative dialogues and other opportunities to connect across differences. Like service, these are important. Public work is another way to create bridging social capital.

Bill Doherty, founder of the Citizen Professional Center at the University of Minnesota, is an outstanding example. He pioneered in showing how public work can be applied to family and health sciences professions. The Center’s model of citizen professional begins with the premise that solving complex problems requires many sources of knowledge. They argue that the greatest untapped resource for improving health and social well-being is the knowledge, wisdom, and energy of individuals, families, and communities who face challenging issues in their everyday lives. The approach has generated multiple partnerships embodying this civic philosophy. FEDS, a project on diabetes led by Indian elders in the Twin Cities, brings together community members and medical practitioners. A movement of suburban families works to tame overscheduled, consumerist lives; a project in Burnsville, Minnesota, involves families developing strategies to counter obesity among children; an African American “Citizen Fathers” project led to a partnership between Minneapolis police and the black community after the shooting of Philando Castille in 2016.⁶ Bill’s work shows how it is possible to translate the private skills of therapists into public skills that bridge differences.

In 2016, Bill saw Trump’s campaign—and other authoritarians around the world— as a “bugle call that therapists must begin to take seriously so as to move beyond focusing narrowly on individual mental health problems.” Like Obama, he argued that “the larger social glue is weakening.” After the election Bill helped design the process for a new group called Better Angels, which seeks to build relationships across partisan divides. They began by addressing the chasm in the rural community of Warren County, Ohio.

Fears on both side of the divide were immense. “I feel afraid to open my mouth,” said one Trump supporter, Keith Johnson. Kouhyar Mostashfi, a Muslim immigrant, expressed fear that if “this culture of animosity continues to grow it might give groups a blank check [for] violence.” Many wanted to rebuild a shared citizenship but all doubted it could happen. Doherty and his colleagues organized a meeting with Trump and Clinton supporters.⁷ Participants wrote a statement afterwards that read, “A number of us on both sides began our meetings convinced that the other side could not be dealt with on the basis of rational thought. We say unanimously that our experiences of talking with rather than at or about each other caused us to abandon our belief.” People described how their views had changed. “If more people could have this experience our country could come back together and understand it’s OK to be different,” said Andie Moon. “I have permission to call him my Muslim friend,” said Gregory Smith, talking about Mostashfi. He’s going to attend a Christian church, and I’m going to visit a mosque with him.” Another said, “If you did twenty thousand of these across the nation you would change the world.” They celebrated in a barn owned by a Tea Party leader, featuring a concert by the well-known progressive folk singer Peter Yarrow. Residents sang “We Shall Overcome” and “This Land Is Your Land, This Land Is My Land.” This began the process which created the movement called Better Angels. John Wood, the African American communications sees it as nonviolence in action. I sent Anna the link to one of John’s talks, on YouTube, and it is worth our watching as a congregation. I believe implicit in John’s nonviolence is the idea of cooperative work that repairs our commonwealth as it reknits our social fabric.

American history is rich with such examples. We are working on the Citizen Professional initiative with America’s regional universities to remember and build on them. Another key element is stories of public work which build rebuild diverse, common communities and a sense of the commonwealth.

Stories of public work that builds the commonwealth

I suggested the Nehemiah scripture this week because it was used by a group called of East Brookline Churches, which created the Nehemiah Homes organising effort. I told this story in the book that started our work through the Humphrey Institute in 1987, *CommonWealth*.

East Brooklyn Churches a church-based community organization based largely among African American churches in the impoverished neighbourhoods of Brooklyn, part of the nation’s oldest network of community organizations, the Industrial Areas Foundation. The group began modestly in 1978 when a small group of Catholic and Protestant clergy and laity met to discuss the formidable array of community issues they faced. They followed the organising dictum to start with small ‘winnable’ issues around which poor and powerless people can experience confidence-building success and develop sober assessment of obstacles. EBC members forced clean-ups of rotten meat in local food stores, pressured the city to install hundreds of street signs, led in renovation of local parks and worked together to clean up vacant lots. Slowly they forged a sense of solidarity and potency. ‘We are not a grassroots organization,’ thundered the Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood, the president of the group. “Grass roots are shallow roots. Grass roots are fragile roots. *Our* roots are deep roots. Our roots have fought for existence in the shattered glass of East New York.”

Youngblood began a sermon series on the book of Nehemiah. People in the community saw its application to their situation.

In the early 1980s, East Brooklyn Churches began a project to build thousands of houses affordable for working-class and low-income people, a scale that dwarfed any low income housing development initiative in the country. They turned to housing out of the conviction that only widespread home ownership could create the kind of 'roots' essential for renewed community pride and freedom from fear. Teaming up with a well-known developer, I.D. Robbins, they adopted his controversial argument that for half the cost of high-density, high-rise apartments, it would be possible to build large numbers of single-family homes, owned by low-income families. In turn, that would create neighbourhood anchors. East Brooklyn Churches named their undertaking the 'Nehemiah Plan', recalling the Old Testament prophet sent back to Jerusalem by the King of Persia in 420 BC to lead in the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. Nehemiah held together a motley crew – 40 different groups are named, including merchants, priests, governors, members of the perfume and goldsmiths' guilds, and women. At one point he organised a great assembly to call to account nobles making excessive profit from the poor. The key point of the story is this: As the Jewish people rebuilt their walls, they renewed their sense of purpose and identity as a people and a sense of the commonwealth of Israel that was both material and symbolic embodiment of their life together. Although the group had won financial commitments from an impressive array of backers including many church bodies, they also needed funding from the city. They were stymied by the New York mayor Edward Koch, so they held a press conference to publicise the effort. That evening, the local CBS television affiliate broadcast clips of the desolate area. A reporter told the story of the organising which led to the plan for low income houses and read from Nehemiah: 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer disgrace.'

The CBS story was an example of a story of citizen agency through nonviolent public work in which diverse groups could see themselves. It activated immense support. It took some time, but Mayor Koch eventually declared himself the new Nehemiah and pledged his support for the effort. Though it was mostly an African American event in Brooklyn, Polish and Italian immigrants and other ethnics from neighborhoods across New York also joined the interfaith religious celebration at the ground-breaking for the first homes. Since that day nearly 4 000 have been built. There have been only one or two defaults, over thirty years. It became the spark for the only major low income housing legislation during the Reagan years.

The work ahead

In the final scripture of today, John 14:12, Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, whomever believes in me will also do the works that I do and greater works than these." I am convinced that he was getting at the point that we need many examples of nonviolent work that builds and rebuilds our commonwealth. and also we need many stories of connection and common effort across differences if we are to remember the idea of the commonwealth – both popular government "of the people, by the people, and for the people," and common things that we all have investment in creating and sustaining. In a world in flames, there is nothing more crucial.

¹ Dhruv Khullar, "How Social Isolation Is Killing Us," *New York Times* December 22, 2016; Frank Ninivaggi "Loneliness: A New Epidemic in the USA," *Psychology Today*, Feb 12, 2019.

² Jayne O'Connell, "Teens aren't socializing in the real world. And that's making them super lonely," *USA TODAY* March 20 1019; her in-depth article discusses a number of other studies as well.

³ Jennifer L. Cline, "Losing Face: How Facebook Disconnects Us," *Counseling Today* 8/26/14 <http://ct.counseling.org/2014/08/losing-face-how-facebook-disconnects-us/>."

⁴ See the extensive survey data on "Better Angels," <https://www.better-angels.org/>

⁵ For an excellent treatment, see Paul C. Taylor, "Moral Perfectionism," in in Tommie Shelby and Brandon Terry Eds., *To Shape a New World: essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 2018).

⁶ William J. Doherty, Tai J. Mendenhall, and Jerica M. Berge, "The Families and Democracy and Citizen Health Care Project," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 36, no. 4 (October 2010): 389–402.

⁷ Quotes from "Finding Common Ground in Ohio with Peter Yarrow," posted by Better Angels Media, *YouTube* video, 9:27, June 5, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LSvR9Ahrhs.