

# Toward a Democratic Culture

by Ernesto Cortes Jr.

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*“We must commit to rebuilding the institutions for a decent society.”*

Long before recent terrorist attacks, invasions, economic downturns, and hurricanes, the alienating and homogenizing effects of globalization and the dominant market culture had begun to isolate people from one another and from their institutions, destroying our relationality and creating a new kind of tribalism. The undeniable polarization and cynicism pervading our nation’s political landscape is explained in the dominant culture by two competing narratives: Our democracy is in disarray either due to the moral failure and cynicism of the elite (and the acquiescence and materialistic culture of the rest of us) or because of the concentration of wealth and its corrosive effect on our political institutions. But neither explanation encompasses the decline of the intermediary institutions in which we are taught the habits and practices requisite for a vibrant democratic culture. In addition, these institutions would have enabled us to develop the social knowledge to act effectively to counter the demagoguery of both parties in the public arena. Without these institutions, we are reduced to self-absorbed narcissism, which easily appropriates the language of consumerism and individualism.

In this age of “political correctness,” instead of engaging in conversation, debate or argument, most of us engage in “station identification,” in which we basically identify ourselves and our predetermined positions, then (at best) pause appropriately while someone else speaks and we think about what we are going to say next. Or we avoid conversation completely, especially if we know it has the potential to expose tension and conflict, as political discussions often do. As a result, the real conversations of engagement—of listening, and particularly of listening to the other person as another

er, as someone with a different perspective, a different point of view, a different story or history—rarely take place anymore.

Yet it is only through these kinds of conversations that people develop the capacity to think long-term, to consider something outside of their own experience, to reconsider their own experience, and to develop a larger vision of their neighborhood, their state, or their society. Unfortunately people don't develop the capacity to have deliberative conversations on their own. These are skills that must be cultivated inside institutions.

Alexis de Tocqueville, an early observer of American political life, was the first to understand the important role of institutions in American politics. He was also the first to link them to the kind of culture requisite for the functioning and survival of democracy. In studying American politics, Tocqueville developed a concern for what he called the Augustinian Soul in American life. In this Augustinian Soul, Tocqueville recognized the tension between an inclination toward self-absorbed narcissism and, at the same time, a tendency to overreach in an attempt to dominate. Fortunately he also believed that the institutions of American life provided a place where people learned the skills of public life and relationality. These mediating institutions created a culture in which the inclinations of the Augustinian Soul were balanced through the face-to-face contact and engagement that went on in local politics.

Tocqueville was impressed that, while people took a strong interest in national political elections, the politics that really mattered were not those of the nation, but the politics of the state, the township, and the school board. What he saw in these local politics was

the capacity to engage in direct deliberations around schools, around townships, and around all the issues important to the community. Through these various associations, people with differences would come together to bargain, negotiate, and even engage in reciprocal activities, such as raising barns and homes and building schools and roads. This face-to-face political engagement, according to Tocqueville, was the antidote to our tendency for self-absorption.

The other part of the Augustinian Soul that concerned Tocqueville was our capacity to overreach, to make larger claims on life than were appropriate. Tocqueville thought that our enterprising culture, though valuable and important in terms of providing opportunity, had the potential for greed and thus to produce large amounts of inequality. This inequality, in turn, would create concentrations of wealth and power that undermine the political process. But again, Tocqueville thought he saw the antidote. He believed America's intermediate institutions curbed this inclination by connecting us and helping us understand the social nature of our existence and development, thereby enlarging our understanding of our own self-interest (or as he put it "self interest,



properly understood”). He believed these institutions would challenge us to think beyond that which is immediate and narrowly individual.

Recent decades have witnessed an erosion of the institutions Tocqueville thought were so important to sustain our associative democracy: family, neighborhood organization, political party, congregation, labor union, and mutual-aid society. One of the purposes of these mediating institutions had been to assist people in slowing down, navigating, and adjusting to change, be it economic, political, personal, or societal. It is particularly damaging that at the same time these institutions have been deteriorating, the rate of change in modern society has increased dramatically. The weakening of these institutions has meant that massive technological and cultural changes, embedded in and concomitant with the globalizing forces transforming our world, have untethered our Augustinian Souls, creating an internal migration into our own selves. For the wealthy this is manifested in a culture of narcissism; and for those not so wealthy it becomes alienation—or Simone Weil’s concept of *malheur*, a crushing of the spirit, that occurs when life becomes so overwhelming only the instincts for survival are relevant.

A counterweight to these forces is for organized mediating institutions to place an emphasis on practices focused on character development, *philia* (Aristotle’s notion of political friendship), *phronesis* (the practical wisdom that comes from *metis* or tacit knowledge), *praxis* (action that is aimed, calculated, and develops reflective thinking), and the justice that emerges when all parties with a stake in the question are involved in the deliberation. These qualities require the customs and

habits of deliberation and negotiation that are necessary for the successful functioning of a free and open democratic society.

In my own experience, organizing cultivates those practices when we take time to teach people to have one-on-one relational meetings

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## People don’t have deliberative conversations on their own.

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and reflect on them afterward. The practices are further developed when the relational meetings lead to house meetings, whether they take place in a house or a school, a recreation center or a synagogue. These small group meetings are about telling stories and developing narratives, but also about inquiring into the deep concerns affecting people’s daily lives. The quality of schools, the absence of safe playground equipment, flooding, low wages, lack of health care—these types of issues are all too often a part of the daily lives of low and moderate income families. These small group conversations, properly directed and aimed, then lead to research actions, to explore the dynamics, dimensions, and complexities of an issue, in order to prepare for public action.

Through this process, we learn to engage people who come from other contexts—business leaders, bureaucrats, union allies, and so forth. Properly conducted, these conversations help people get inside one another’s moral universe through sharing their stories and experiences, and by so doing, begin to develop political friendships, or *philia*. Another way of thinking about it is that the organizing

process is about putting a relational concept of self-interest in tension with being concerned for others. It enables people to understand that sustaining and developing their own self-interest requires them to be concerned with the self-interest of others. This doesn't happen naturally, but only through the institutions that develop the relational context in which people begin to understand that for their children to do well in school requires a public education system that enables other people's children to succeed as well. Or, as Benjamin Franklin so prosaically put it: If we don't hang together, we all hang separately.

An example of this kind of transformation occurred in the early 1980s when the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation network was organizing to support a new public education finance and accountability system, known as House Bill 72. One of the biggest stumbling blocks for our network was the issue of funding for bilingual education. Members of some of the more middle-class Anglo congregations involved in the network thought bilingual education was a strategy that kept students from learning English and becoming "more American." It was only through conversations and engagement (27 house meetings in just one congregation alone) with those who had experiences different from their own that a common understanding emerged. This is just one illustration of how the organizing process can overcome obstacles to creating one of the prerequisites that Aristotle thought



was necessary for the common good the connection of our politicalness to our humanity.

For Aristotle, politicalness had nothing to do with politicians, but rather with our disposition to seek the company of one

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## Deliberation and negotiation are necessary for a free society.

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another and form *philia*—or what he called political friendships. Such friendships emerge among people who collaborate, work together, fight together, hold each other accountable, and care about each other's mutual development.

This concept of *philia* is reflected cogently in

Hannah Arendt's essay on Lessing, in *Men in Dark Times*. Lessing's motto was to

be "every man's friend but no man's brother." *Philia* is not about inti-

macy, or warmth or affection; it

is about the disinterested capacity to be concerned about the

Other's well being: the Other

who has become your com-

rade, with whom you are in

solidarity, but not necessarily

always in agreement. *Philia*

requires both face-to-face engage-

ment and the capacity to step out-

side of oneself and see the Other as

having a claim on us. It requires recog-

nizing the Other's dreams, aspirations, hopes,

and anxieties, as well as his or her depth and

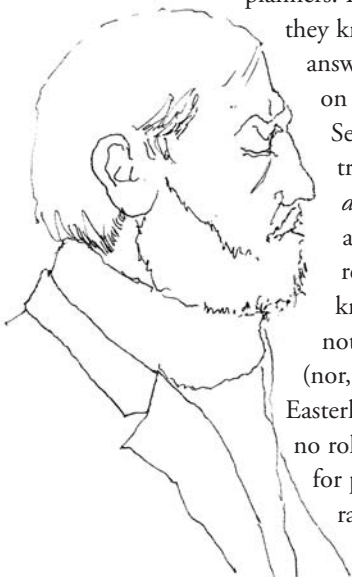
complexity. To put it another way, for *philia*

to begin to develop you must *know the Other's story*.

The concept of *phroenesis* is closely related to what the Greeks called *metis*, or local knowledge. *Metis* is not only a set of practical skills and intelligence grounded in experience, but it is used specifically in reference to the capacity to adapt to a constantly changing natural and human environment. To operate out of *metis* necessarily includes ongoing evaluation and adjustment. People or institutions using do not assume they have correctly identified either the problem or the solution; they instead assume that only through incremental learning and constant feedback and evaluation will they understand the real issues and be able to reach long-term solutions.

William Easterly makes a similar point in his book, *The White Man's Burden*, when he differentiates between planners and searchers. The subtitle of his book: "Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good" is an indictment of planners. Planners think

they know the answers; they rely on experts. Searchers, in contrast, assume they *don't* know the answers; they rely on local knowledge. I do not mean to imply (nor, I suspect, does Easterly) that there is no role for experts or for planning but rather that the knowledge of experts is



most useful if it is elicited in response to *metis* and *phroenesis*. As for planning, when plans are not adaptable, responsive to experience and feedback, then they have little basis in reality and can be more of a hindrance than a help.

The struggle to rebuild New Orleans may turn out to be a classic example of the need to synthesize expert knowledge with *metis* and ongoing evaluation and accountability. Rather than focusing on incremental short-term projects like restoring utilities and organizing temporary housing for the workers on whose return a larger rebuilding project is predicated, the emphasis was placed on "comprehensive" strategies and "master" plans prepared by developers and architects from across the nation. The Urban Land Institute proposed a near complete transformation of the city, overseen by an appointed board rather than by a democratically elected or broadly accountable institution. The ULI plan was based on the assumption that families living in poor neighborhoods would not return; and even if they did, their homes could be targeted for "eminent domain" buy-outs and transformed into a greenbelt. Rejected by the public and remaining elected officials almost as soon as it was presented, elements of the ULI plan were nonetheless incorporated into other master plans promulgated by appointed commissions at both the local and state levels. Debate and dissent over which elements of which strategy are most appropriate continue to contribute to delays in moving into any action at all; and not only are these delays crippling in nature, but the emphasis at first on creating a "comprehensive" plan inhibited the role that incremental learning (and planning) might play in leading to sustainable long-term success.

At the same time the absence of politics and public debate in the planning process left the voices of the vast majority of families not only on the sidelines but subsumed beneath the priorities of businesses and politicians. Genuine democratic politics is the realm through which

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## Genuine politics recognizes restraints.

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a community seeks control of its fate. Andrew Gamble reminds us, in his book *Politics and Fate*, that the present era has been declared “anti-political”; according to the pundits and philosophers, globalization, technology, bureaucracy, and the isolated individualism which they have wrought (and dare we say, natural disasters) have rendered us slaves to the forces of modernity. There’s no point in politics, because these forces are beyond the control of any collective effort. Yet Gamble also points out that faith is the counterweight to fate: faith in the capacity to act; faith in genuine politics; faith in neighbors, institutions, and colleagues. According to Gamble, fate is a restraint, rather than an unalterable destiny. And genuine politics—politics that involves debate, negotiation and compromise—already recognizes restraints; it works around and within them.

A politics that is going to counteract fate has to be attentive to the development of institutions and the individuals inside those institutions. Mobilization strategies, while clearly appropriate in some circumstances, do nothing to rebuild the institutions that develop people’s capacities for genuine engagement and transformation. In fact, an overemphasis on mobilization can increase the pressures on our

remaining institutions, rather than counteract them. A strategy like that of the Industrial Areas Foundation is attentive to internal growth and development of institutions and individuals, as well as to the external political action required to address concerns of families and communities.

There are always, for example, concerns and crises to be addressed in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The broad-based organization affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation in metropolitan Los Angeles, *One-LA*, has been organizing to strengthen and improve area campuses for more than five years. A number of victories, ranging from prioritizing bond packages and reorganizing year-round campus schedules to toxic waste clean-ups, have made clear the power of an organized constituency of parents, educators, classified workers, and other community members. However the organizing work in LAUSD has not been just about public action; it has been centered on mentoring and developing leadership among people who genuinely cared about schools but did not have the skills necessary for engagement and collaboration.

Violence was rampant near the campus of Harmony Elementary in LAUSD. One of the students had been shot and killed. And



Robert Cordova, the principal, initially saw his work with *One-LA* as a way to deflect concerns of parents onto a different institution. However once Cordova began having relational meetings with organizers and experienced *One-LA* leaders, he began to see himself not just as a manager of crises, but as an educational leader with a broader vision for the transformation of his school. He began to see the benefit of working with people outside the walls of the campus and he started viewing parents as assets rather than liabilities. He learned that sharing power did not reduce his authority as principal and that collaboration could lead to innovation and creativity—things he could never have “mandated” from the top down.

Today Harmony Elementary is not only safer, and located in a new building, but teachers are transforming their curriculum and instruction methods as well. Their collaboration with one another, with parents, and with Mr. Cordova, has loosed their imaginations about possibilities for change.

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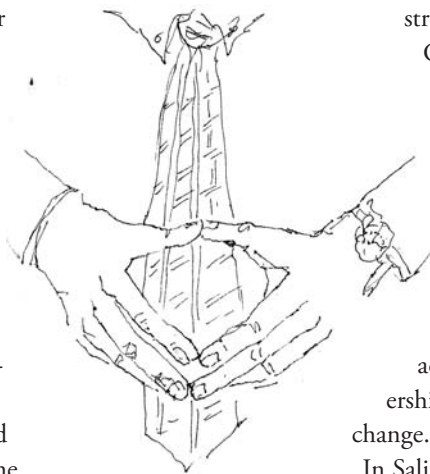
## Collaboration could lead to innovation.

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They have reorganized the campus budget to hire an English language development coordinator, something teachers felt was vital for a campus where 80 percent of the

students are Spanish-speaking English language learners. Cordova’s development as a leader inside his institution strengthened not only his school, but the other adults associated with it and his LAUSD area superintendent has recruited him to lead training sessions for other principals in his area. His transformation has strengthened *One-LA* as well: Cordova collaborates with and mentors other principals from campuses working with *One-LA*, and sees himself as an active leader in the broader metropolitan community, using democratic practices not only to counteract crises but to develop leadership and constituencies for change.

In Salinas, California, leaders of the broad-based organization, Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action (COPA), refused to accept that the closing of their public libraries was “fated” to happen. Indeed, their faith in the democratic process and in the story of Salinas as the home of literary giant John Steinbeck propelled them into action that recognized the values of both short-term restraints and longer-term debate and negotiation. In early 2005, when the city council voted to close the three city libraries to save money, short-term negotiations focused on private fundraising to keep the libraries open for limited hours. At the same time, COPA leaders began negotiating with the city council to declare a state of emergency, permitting them to place a half-cent general fund sales tax on the November 2005 ballot. Measure V, as it was





called, proposed to fund general city services, such as police, fire, libraries, parks, and recreation. COPA leaders educated voters on the issue and helped turn them out in

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## Self-interest includes understanding of the common good.

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record numbers to the polls, where the tax measure won by 62 percent—even though three previous measures had failed to pass. The funds generated will provide an estimated additional \$120 million to the City of Salinas over the next ten years.

The difference between Measure V and its failed predecessors hinged on the conversations and negotiations of the organizing process. In our experience, people are willing to increase their own taxes if they see the increase as being in their self-interest. Self-interest, properly understood, is not a narrow matter of dollars and cents, but includes a broader understanding of the common good. When plans for spending a tax increase are negotiated publicly with a broad-based constituency of taxpayers, people see more clearly their stake in the compromise that emerges. Measure V and the role of the COPA organization provide just one example of dozens of stories from organizations in which an organized constituency and a process of public negotiation and compromise has led voters to commit themselves to paying higher taxes as an investment in their communities.

The Governor's elimination of a luxury car tax, coupled with severe constraints on property tax increases, has left many California cities with budget crises. The City of Maywood, near Los Angeles, developed what is unfortunately not a unique strategy to generate resources. A California resident cannot receive a driver's license without providing a Social Security number; a car being driven without a license is subject to impounding by police. To raise revenue, the City of Maywood set up weekly check points to identify and impound cars. Week after week undocumented immigrants—who were not allowed to have driver's licenses—had their cars impounded. They then paid fines averaging \$1,200 to have a vehicle returned only to have it impounded again the next week. It was clear that this policy was about generating revenue rather than securing public safety (which is the usual justification for impounding an unlicensed driver's vehicle) because these immigrants were denied the option of securing licenses.

As the reality of the City of Maywood's strategy emerged through hundreds of relational meetings, house meetings, and research actions, *One-LA* leaders made a decision to take public action. In the short-run, thousands of people organized public meetings with elected and appointed officials to demand—successfully—that the weekly checkpoints, which impounded hundreds of cars each week, be terminated. Even so, some police officers then moved on to stake out the garment factories where undocumented workers were employed. Officers would target cars with rosaries hanging from the rearview mirrors, citing them as visual impairments, or pull cars over for minor infractions like a



cracked taillight, and then impound the cars when drivers could not produce a license.

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## Real politics leads to justice.

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Clearly the practice of more politics was required.

Leaders of *One-LA* organized precinct walks to discuss with voters the abuses by the Maywood police department, abuses that had been tacitly sanctioned by a four-person majority on the city council. Three of the four stood for re-election in 2005, their campaigns supported in large part by contributions from towing companies, and refused to meet with *One-LA* or to rein in the police department. Their challengers, with one incumbent, who had a history of working with the organization, committed themselves to *One-LA's* agenda for change, which included improvements to city infrastructure and protections for tenants, as well as police department reform, then won overwhelmingly on election day. Despite vandalism, harassment,

threats, and false accusations made against community leaders and organizers working with *One-LA*, voter turn-out was twice as high as that of the previous election, increasing from 1,400 to over 3,000 voters. *One-LA* leaders had contacted more than 600 voters during their precinct walks, and 1,100 people attended their public assembly the night before the election.

Fate seemed particularly harsh on the evacuees from Hurricane Katrina. Abandoned, without food, water, or transportation in the face of rising floodwaters, many residents of New Orleans understandably viewed the future as beyond their control. As soon as evacuees began arriving at the Houston Astrodome, leaders and organizers from The Metropolitan Organization (TMO), the broad-based IAF affiliate in Houston, met at the Astrodome and began identifying pastors, deacons, principals, teachers, and other members of the evacuee community who had organizing and leadership experience from their lives in New Orleans. A resulting, 70-person leadership team began conducting house meetings—small group conversations—among evacuees. These were the only conversations being held with the evacuees about what they viewed as their most immediate needs; and as specific concerns were heard, TMO worked with city, county, and federal officials to organize a response.

These organized evacuees earned a number of early victories for themselves, including a playground for their children and an accelerated process for moving the elderly into housing. At least one of their victories impacted not only the Houston evacuees but everyone with cell phones from the 504 area code, and later, the evacuees from Hurricane Rita, who faced a similar crisis. Early on,



TMO leaders had heard concerns that cell-phone services from 504 were being cancelled by the phone companies. Knowing that this would clearly have destroyed the evacuees' efforts to reconnect with family members, TMO and the evacuee leadership team, working with city officials and the area congressional delegation, secured a ruling from the F.C.C. prohibiting the cancellation of services.

Throughout Texas and Louisiana, organizations worked with evacuees from both Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to identify and act on their interests and concerns. This work included the practice of politics, not only with elected officials but with FEMA, the Red Cross, and a myriad of other institutions at local, state, and national levels. It continues as the Katrina Survivors Networks, organized by Southwest and Southeast Network IAF leaders, joined with the Jeremiah Group of New Orleans on March 25th in ratifying an agenda for rebuilding New Orleans and turning out absentee voters for the upcoming city elections. Jeremiah leaders and other Network Survivor leaders know New Orleans will be rebuilt; the question is who rebuilds and how.

And that is a question of politics.

The effective practice of real politics leads to justice. Stuart Hampshire, in *Justice Is Conflict*, makes a useful distinction

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## The wisdom of citizens is a prerequisite.

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between justice and the absence of conflict. He reminds us that conflict is inevitable, given the different interests existing in any society, but that justice implies a fairness in

the procedures for managing conflict. In a democracy, the procedure for managing that conflict is politics. For politics to be just, according to Hampshire, it requires the engagement of a variety of individuals, who will certainly represent adversarial views, but who nonetheless agree to collaborate with one another in the political process toward resolution. And the practice of politics requires institutions that can teach the customs and habits necessary for the negotiation of competing values.

These same institutions are required to teach people how to understand their own *metis* or *phronesis*. Politics requires both practical and tacit knowledge, which ordinary people possess but are rarely aware of. They don't know they have it because they are too rarely encouraged to reflect on their own experience or strategies for coping with everyday life. Belief in the capacities and wisdom of ordinary citizens is a fundamental prerequisite for democracy. Saul Alinsky, founder of the Industrial Areas Foundation, reminded us more than 50 years ago that believing in democracy requires the belief that with the right information, and the capacity to understand and engage in argument around that information, at least 51 percent of the people will make the right decision. Although making the right information available is critical, as citizens we must commit to much more.

As citizens we must commit to rebuilding the institutions that are requisite for a decent society. In his book *The Decent Society*, Avishai Margalit describes a civilized society as one in which people are nice to each other and follow the rules. But a decent society is one that goes beyond civility. In a decent

society, the institutions do not treat adults like second-class citizens or children who are to be seen and not heard. Notwithstanding the negatives of Vietnam, Lyndon Baines Johnson will always be someone I admire because of

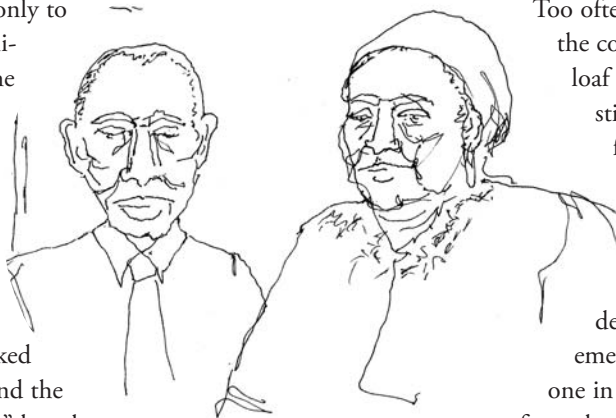
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## People connect to the stories of others.

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his rationale for signing the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act: that no man or woman should ever be humiliated in front of their own children. Or to put it another way, in a decent society, an ordinary person should be able to appear in public without shame. Unfortunately, at this point in our nation's history many of our institutions not only treat people without respect but are moving toward treating them as outcasts or even outlaws. I refer not only to undocumented immigrants, but also to the poor, the working poor, and, to some degree, any person who dares to raise a voice against the dominant culture.

Our founders talked about "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," but the latter two presuppose the context and space for public deliberation, agency, and the right and capacity to dissent. Part of agency requires the capacity to have *erlebnis*, the German word for "lived experience," or something



more than an undigested happening. Unfortunately you cannot have this kind of an experience without a willingness to be disrupted and changed; you cannot have this experience outside the context of a relationship—a willingness to act and be acted upon. Through relationships, people develop the capacity to connect that which is disruptive and meaningful in their own life stories to the stories of others. This is what allows us to connect the story of developing democratic institutions in New Amsterdam at the beginning of our history to rebuilding democracy in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

It is not a constitution that makes a democracy, but the habits and practices of empathy, relationality, deliberation, negotiation, confrontation, argument, and ultimately—compromise. This is the stuff of democracies. Saul Alinsky used to say that if one word defines democracy it is *compromise*.

Too often today, instead of the compromise of half a loaf of bread (which is still life-giving), we are forced to accept the compromise of Solomon half a baby (which is a corpse).

To a surprising degree, a plutocracy has emerged in our culture: one in which certain groups of people can manipulate the system to serve *their* interests and exempt *themselves* from normal requirements and restraints. This is reflected in the fact that both major political parties are focused on the wealthiest 20 percent of families. Or, as I

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sometimes put it: The Democratic party represents people making between \$150,000 and \$350,000; the Republican party represents everyone over \$350,000; and people earning less than \$150,000 are represented by no one. Notwithstanding the language of our Constitution and our laws, this cultural shift suggests an emerging caste system in the United States. The only way to curb such a shift is to rebuild the democratic institutions that develop in people their capacity

to engage one another in the kind of reflection, relationships, and deliberations that are requisite for the functioning of a decent society.

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