

Becoming Trustworthy

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We hear that Americans are polarized. Nationally, there is not of enough trust to bridge the national chasm. Yet in our small towns and neighborhoods, it is often difficult to find strong community wide divisive polarity. Instead there is usually a nearly invisible trustfulness that allows the residents to collectively do the necessary work of producing community well-being.

A critical source of this trustfulness is the result of the experience of doing community work together. This work is most often manifested through local clubs, groups_organizations, faith groups and associations. This collective work depends upon the experience of being productive – to be able to say, “We did that” or “We made that.” This ability to make a collective vision manifest is the essence of what it means to be a citizen: One who has an idea and with other citizens makes it come true. This experience requires investment of the substance of oneself. This involves commitments, skills, time and money. When this experience of mutual investment takes place, the trustful infrastructure of community emerges, born of community work.

There are two citizen methods that usually precede productive community work. First, is deciding what is to be done. Second is deciding who should do it. These are the precursors of the doing that creates experience in community work. However, they are activities whose tools are words. On the other hand, the collective productivity is a deeply felt experience engaging highly valued capacities and talents. This experience has the quality of being handmade and homemade. It is within our capacity and control.

These qualities remind us of Gandhi’s small hand driven spinning wheel. After he led the political revolution the industrial revolution emerged. Gandhi then advocated that every Indian should spend at least half an hour each day with a small hand spinning wheel. This daily work would collectively keep the community productive and free of the dependence on British-made industrial fabric that would lead to a new kind of functionless servitude.

In a Gandhian parallel, without local citizen productivity, large systems will replace community functions. In this way we lose the context for trust-making as we become pitiable ex-citizens transformed into dependent consumers and clients.

Gandhi's spinning wheel symbolized the relationship between small simplicity and liberty. His wisdom also applies to trust-making. Local trust is nurtured by knowing that small is beautiful, simple is elegant and together they are powerful.

The productive work of the citizen experience most often depends on keeping the number of people small enough that each can know the name of the other. When the scale grows too large the need for manager and money emerges and the productive citizen experience is slowly replaced by the executive, manager or professional.

Gandhi's spinning wheel also spoke to the importance of "local doability." Grand plans can be beyond our capacities and therefore we don't try or fail or turn the work over to a professional.

So, one explanation for trustful communities is that their work is small scale and their activity appears to be simple.

This small scale and uncomplex process is usually seen by professionals, managers and academics as inconsequential at most and "nice" at most. The powerful meaning of collective citizen experience is largely unnoticed because it seems to have no high-scale visibility or policy consequences or impact.

Gandhi might say that these institutionalized people can't see, understand or value this citizen productivity because they don't have a spinning wheel. They don't experience each day the power of making the thread that creates the fabric of community. The community fabric is most evident in the small and simple work of associations, clubs and organizations. While they may seem inconsequential they produce:

- The basic functions that create local well-being.
- A sense of efficacy and power among local citizens.
- The social capital that leads each of the particular citizen activities to have multiple outcomes.
- The advocacy ability to change institutional policies and practices. One example is the work of small groups of La Leche League mothers who were able to force the American Academy of Pediatrics to end their support of commercial infant formula and endorse breast feeding instead.
- Movements of aggregated associations that resulted in greater change than any high-scale systems could imagine or achieve. These associational aggregations powered the civil rights, woman's, environmental and LGBTQ movements.
- The small simple context where trust is generated by the mutual experience of engaging in the community work that makes a community work.

Rather than being inconsequential, this associational world is the vital center of citizen production that is the foundation of our democracy – powered by trust.

In our Capitol of mistrust, perhaps we can give each of our elected officials a hand powered spinning wheel. That would provide them with the experience of spinning their unique thread and then weaving it into the fabric of democracy. Then, the experience of productive, small and simple work can create the trust that underlays all productive common democratic work.

Does anyone out there have a spare hand-driven spinning wheel? If you could give it to your senator perhaps you can get a charitable deduction and save the nation as well.