The Common Good

Perils of Partisanship | Markets | The American Spirit | Poetry | Civil Discourse
I there’s one thing we can agree to disagree on, it’s “the common good.” From healthcare to national defense, affirmative action to income taxes, we’re passionate about what we believe is in the best interests of all. The Preamble of the Constitution reminds us that we came together to “form a more perfect union” and to “promote the general welfare,” yet, neither Congress nor we as neighbors seem capable of compromise. As Americans we are discordantly divisive and stolidly stubborn. How, then, have we sustained this great experiment in democracy so well for so long? What is it that drives us to our distinctly American individualism, yet compels us to cooperate for the benefit of our fellow man? These are the questions we contemplate in this issue. As equal partners in the national dialogue, let us now consider “The Common Good.”

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The theme for this issue reflects the current national discourse on what we as Americans understand as the “common good.” Undoubtedly, it is a survival mechanism—just human nature—to think of our own wellbeing before that of others.

My first memory of considering the common good came around 1970, when I was sixteen years old. At that time, Jesse Jackson headed up Operation Breadbasket, an organization dedicated to improving economic opportunities for black communities. I attended several rallies with my church group at the old Capitol Theater on the south side of Chicago to hear Jackson preach. I lived in a homogenously white suburb and those Saturday mornings (when we were all exhorted to vote) were banished. Quaker Mary Dryer was executed. Her colleagues in Massachusetts fought back. They challenged Puritan orthodoxy, they equally challenged civil authority. Allowing them to remain in Massachusetts today would undermine the Puritan version of the common good.

When individuals were banished. Quaker Mary Dryer was executed. My aim is not to disparage the concept of the common good, but rather to argue that it is often ambiguous and contested. Just examine the contemporary debates over health care, environmental pollution, support for public education, eradication of poverty, and numerous other issues. Advocates from all sides often evoke the common good in staking out their positions.

In a diverse society that also values individualism, differences over the common good will always remain. The humanities, however, provide the perspective for pursuing the common good in thoughtful and meaningful ways which can result in the greatest good for the greatest number of individuals. This is why the humanities are so important in our civic culture, perhaps now more than ever. Please consider joining me in supporting the work of the Oklahoma Humanities Council in promoting this perspective.

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**A LITTLE LEGACY**

I confess to havingiggled my way through your “End Notes” [Winter 2013, page 31]—a piece in which you cleverly persuaded readers that scholars and practitioners in the humanities now and then poke their noses into popular culture as well as into times too heavy to lift. Well done! —Sandra Soli, Edmond

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**LEAVE A LEGACY**

Take advantage of the Charitable IRA Rollover Provision. Deadline: December 31, 2013

By making a gift provision in your will or trust—often referred to as a planned gift—you can defer a tax burden. And by making a gift provision in your will or trust, you can help ensure that Oklahoma Humanities Council will continue to do its important work.

Send your comments, questions, and suggestions to Editor Carla Walker at: carla@okhumanities.org or mail correspondence to Oklahoma Humanities, Attn.: Editor, 428 W. California Ave., Ste. 270, Oklahoma City, OK 73102.
Humanities Headlines

Hear | Read | See | Experience

Find more OHC events at: okhumanities.org/calendar

FORUM
The Value of Reconciliation: Opportunity, Equality, and Race
May 29 – 31
Hyatt Regency, Tulsa
100 E. 2nd St.
Info: 918/295-5009

This 4th National Symposium from the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation will explore academic research and community projects that address reconciliation in America, with a special focus on economic and social dimensions. The keynote address and Town Hall discussion on May 30th are free and open to the public. The registration fee applies for symposium participation.

OKLAHOMA CHAUTAUQUA
The Roaring Twenties
May 28 – June 1 • Altus
Southern Prairie Library Sys.
421 N. Hudson
Info: 580/477-2890

June 4 – 8 • Tulsa
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 73102.
110 S.W. 4th
Info: 580/581-3450

June 11 – 15 • Enid
507 S. 4th
Cherokee Strip Regional
Heritage Center
Humphrey Village
Info: 918/237-1907

The 1920s was a decade of American opulence and cultural change. It “roared” as tradition battled with modernism. Come and meet five of the era’s most illustrious characters: Bessie Coleman, Babe Ruth, Will Rogers, Henry Ford, and Zelda Fitzgerald. Evening performances and daytime workshops are free and open to the public.

EXHIBIT
Call for Host Sites

OHC is accepting host site applications for Hometown Teams: How Sports Shape America, a Smithsonian traveling exhibit that will tour six lucky Oklahoma communities from March 2015 to December 2015. [See info about our current exhibit, New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music opposite.] Hometown Teams examines how sports have shaped America’s national character. The project is designed to benefit rural communities and is made possible through Museum on Main Street (MoMS), a partnership of the Smithsonian Institution and the Oklahoma Humanities Council. Small towns organize community events and volunteers; in return, they receive guidance from OHC staff, consultations with a humanities scholar appointed to the project, and the expertise of MoMS professionals.

Benefits include higher visibility, increased attendance, professional museum training, and capacity-building improvements. Interested communities may apply online at: www.okhumanities.org. Deadline for applications is October 1, 2013.

Seeking Nominations — OHC Board of Trustees

The Oklahoma Humanities Council invites nominations for candidates to serve on its Board of Trustees. Mail nominations to OHC by May 31, 2013, at 428 W. California Avenue, Suite 270, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 73102. Include a vita and letter of nomination that emphasizes the candidate’s strengths in the following areas: dedication to promoting statewide programming in humanities disciplines; experience in fundraising; and willingness to attend three meetings per year and serve on various committees.

Nominations from across the state are encouraged.

Why I Give

I never give anything—money, time, energy—unless my investment is returned at least five-fold. My contributions to the Oklahoma Humanities Council are selfish. When I teach a workshop on African American literature and history or lead a Let’s Talk About It, Oklahoma! reading and discussion group, I learn far more from the men and women who join me. Each participant shares his or her perspective, often very different from mine, and we talk about the humanities, which are—to paraphrase Alexander Pope—the proper study of human beings.

When donors from around the state match my financial contribution, I know that together we make an impact that provides benefits on a much larger scale. My contribution (indeed every donor’s gift) is important not only due to its size, but because it shows commitment to this shared endeavour, this ship of many sails: history, literature, philosophy; book festivals, film screenings, community forums, school research, Oklahoma HUMANITIES magazine, and more.

Each person’s gift—whether it’s their time organizing an exhibit or their money to fund rural and urban seed grants or their expertise to enhance education through teacher institutes—is an investment in Oklahoma, in our towns and cities, and in each other. We are fortunate to have a strong Humanities Council deeply committed to bringing national exhibits and local programming to every Oklahoman in the state.

But for me? When I give to the OHC, what I see is the network of learning and sharing spreading through the state. Who wouldn’t want to be part of that?

Want to join Britton Gildersleeve in support of OHC? Use the donation envelope in this magazine or visit our website and click on “Donate.” www.okhumanities.org

Britton Gildersleeve, Ph.D.
OHC Board of Trustees
Oklahoma State University Writing Project
Poetry has always had the “common good” in mind.

Even during darker eras, when the common good might have only been in the back of poetry’s mind, it’s always been there. Some might say that the common good is the reason poetry exists—the preservation of our stories, those first portraits of community and collective history. However we choose to see it, we have always had with us the poet, the “relentless observer” taking it all in, then gently knocking on our skulls when it’s time to deliver the message.

Though one could argue whether or not poetry is the oldest of all the art forms, there’s little doubt that for thousands of years it has been one of the most respected. It’s had its ups and downs, of course. Bad poets are sprinkled over every generation in order to keep us guessing. And we have to take into consideration the times when, for instance, poets had to keep their words about the king in “praise mode” or they were sure to lose their heads. While the joker got away with murder, the poet went straight to the gallows.

Then we have the difficult question of what in the world happened to American poetry in the twentieth century. Academics will crucify me for this gross oversimplification, but the bottom line is that, at some point, poetry wandered off into the halls and way up into the towers of the university, and—outside of a brief acid trip in the ’60s—it never left. I’m not going to pick a fight with professors in a thousand-word article, but I am going to pop my knuckles and offer this problematic claim:

Poetry walked away from the music, its original tune, its purpose, which is—the common good. Not the good of the big prizes and awards. Not the good of the best Master of Fine Arts programs. Not the good of doing whatever it takes to get our work into the big reviews and journals. And though I’ll not mention any by name, they might have words like “New York” in them.

That’s not what I want to focus on, though. What I do want to say is that there is now a growing team of great American poets giving us work that does not buy into all of that. They have kept the common good in mind. They are accessible, yet masterful. We, as readers, can understand what they are saying and, at the same time, reel from their command of language. Names like Stephen Dunn, Sharon Olds, Mary Oliver, and Billy Collins come to mind. But that’s only scratching the surface.

My mission as Poet Laureate of Oklahoma is to spread the word of this “other” kind of poetry to every book club, writers’ group, school, and library in every corner and town of this fine state that will invite me out and let them know that poetry, at least some of it, is coming back to them, and that maybe they should give it one more chance. A Quixotic dream, I know. But I sometimes surprise people with just how much I mean it. Consider these words from Salman Rushdie:

A Poet’s work is to name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world, and stop it from going to sleep.

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BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS

When God swings the fist of weather in Oklahoma, we pull up seats and lean into the performance—here on the stage that gave us one of the great panoramic visions of the 20th Century when it comes to heaven’s fits of meteorological rage.

The Dust Bowl, stirred up by an army of angel wings, came in like a black tidal wave of interstellar grit and dirt.

It ground its stained teeth as it passed over and turned small homesteads and barns into dunes and shallow graves.

The few surviving souls were forced to punch holes through shingles in the roof to get a view of the damage.

Heard tell of one old man who said, ‘O’ Noah never had no troubles like this. Least he had time to build a boat.’

—Nathan Brown, Karma Crisis, 2012

Used by permission of the author

EXTRA! Link to interviews, a calendar of upcoming appearances, and poetry from Nathan Brown’s newest book, Karma Crisis, at: okhumanities.org/state-poet-laureate

August 22, 6:30 p.m. McAlester Public Library 401 N. 2nd, McAlester Info: 918/426-0930 Poetry reading and Q&A Free and open to the public

An Evening with Nathan Brown Oklahoma State Poet Laureate
THE COMMON GOOD
OF POETRY
continued from page 9
I take this charge quite seriously. And though I’m known for leaning into humor quite a bit in my own work, it’s only because I feel like we need to smile, take a few deep breaths in the wake of all the news we get these days. Things are serious enough already. Or, what I sometimes tell other poets in reading and performance workshops: People are depressed enough as it is. They don’t need your help to have to increase their medication. But even through humor and what I call “occasional sideways cynicism,” we can still have the common good passionately at heart.

We need good poetry more than some might think. Our times are crying out for it—for its brevity in a world full of mindless words and rants, its bravery in the face of what we do not want to hear, and its power—like a great song—to pull us over to the side of the road when it’s time for a good cry and some inner change.

This is my challenge, as well as my invitation, to anyone who’s listening.

WHITHER IT GOES
Chins slide off palms in the halls of higher learning, and the beautiful young grad student squeaks and stammers her way through her paper on: The Universality of Place in the Poetry of Walt Whitman.

And the amber waves of her hair look as if they might drown in the sea of suggestions she received from some professor to put more words like “antinomian” and “binary” in her presentation.

Such is the hegemonious enterprise we carry on in the English Buildings of the post-postmodern world.

And in the hot flush of her cheeks, and the quivering confusion of her quaking voice, the crowd can do little more than watch her love of poems begin to die.

—Nathan Brown, Karma Crisis, 2012
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HONESTLY,
I’m 38-and-a-half years old, and she still packs little ice chests and picnic baskets for my road trips, right down to the red and white checkered napkins and plastic-wear.

And I want to tell her, I have money now, mom. I’ve learned to shop, don’t eat at McDonalds anymore. But, I don’t because I love her food.

Here at the tail end of a PhD, she still follows me to the door of the house I grew up in, forcing Ziploc Baggies of frozen bread into my already stuffed hands while telling me how to know when things have gone bad in the fridge. Her face betrays a genuine fear that I’ll eat the expired and die.

And I want to tell her, I’ve had 20 years of higher ed now, mom, and I’ve finally figured out the whole mild thing, the smell of bad meat … and bad people. But, I don’t, because I need the bread, and I’m pretty sure I ate something a little funky a few days ago.

I’ve already lived longer than Christ did and I’ve still gotta eat my veggies when I have dinner with her and dad.

And I want to tell her, longevity is not one of the hallmarks of my profession. But, I don’t because I know I need the fiber.

And, besides, nothing in the universe can stand up to the sheer force and power of a mother’s love.

—Nathan Brown, Karma Crisis, 2012
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What Isn’t For Sale?
By Michael J. Sandel

By Shirley Ward, American Dream

PHOTO: NA TAN BROWN
There are some things money can’t buy—but these days, not many. Almost everything is up for sale.

For example:
- A prison-cell upgrade: $90 a night. In Santa Ana, California, and some other cities, nonviolent offenders can pay for a clean, quiet jail cell, without any non-paying prisoners to disturb them.
- Access to the carpool lane while driving solo: $8. Minneapolis, San Diego, Houston, Seattle, and other cities have sought to ease traffic congestion by letting solo drivers pay to drive in carpool lanes, at rates that vary according to traffic.
- The services of an Indian surrogate mother: $8,000. Western couples seeking surrogates increasingly outsource the job to India, and the price is less than one-third the going rate in the United States.
- The right to shoot an endangered Mark rhino: $250,000. South Africa has begun letting some ranchers sell hunters the right to kill a limited number of rhinos, to give the ranchers an incentive to raise and protect the endangered species.
- Your doctor’s cellphone number: $1,500 and up per year. A growing number of “concierge” doctors offer cellphone access and same-day appointments for patients willing to pay annual fees ranging from $1,500 to $25,000.
- The right to emit a metric ton of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere: $10.50.
- The pay varies according to qualifications, experience, and nationality.

Not everyone can afford to buy these things. But today there are lots of new ways to make money. If you need to earn some extra cash, here are some novel possibilities:

- Sell space on your forehead to display commercial advertising: $10,000. A single mother in Utah who needed money for her son’s education was paid $10,000 by an online casino to install a permanent tattoo of the casino’s Web address on her forehead. Temporary tattoo ads cost less.
- Serve as a human guinea pig in a drug-safety trial for a pharmaceutical company: $7,500. The pay can be higher or lower, depending on the invisiveness of the procedure used to test the drug’s effect and the discomfort involved.
- Fight in Somalia or Afghanistan for a private military contractor: up to $1,000 a day. The pay varies according to qualifications, experience, and nationality.
- Stand in line overnight on Capitol Hill to hold a place for a lobbyist who wants to attend a congressional hearing: $15–$20 an hour. Lobbyists pay line-standing companies, who hire homeless people and others to queue up.
- If you are a second-grader in an underachieving Dallas school, read a book. $2. To encourage reading, schools pay kids for each book they read.

As the Cold War ended, markets and market thinking enjoyed unrivaled prestige, and understandably so. No other mechanism for organizing the production and distribution of goods had proved as successful at generating affluence and prosperity. And yet even as growing numbers of countries around the world embraced market mechanisms in the operation of their economies, something else was happening. Market values were coming to play a greater and greater role in social life. Economics was becoming an imperial domain. Today, the logic of buying and selling no longer applies to material goods alone. It increasingly governs the whole of life.

The years leading up to the financial crisis of 2008 were a heady time of market faith and deregulation—an era of market triumphalism. The era began in the early 1980s, when Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher proclaimed their conviction that greed played a role in the financial crisis, something bigger and is at stake. The most fateful change that unfolded during the past three decades was not an increase in greed. It was the reach of markets, and of market values, into spheres of life traditionally governed by nonmarket norms. To contend with this condition, we need to do more than inveigh against greed; we need to have a public debate about where markets belong—and where they don’t.

Consider, for example, the proliferation of for-profit schools, hospitals, and prisons, and the outsourcing of war to private military contractors. (In Iraq and Afghanistan, private contractors...
The second reason we should hesitate to put everything up for sale is more difficult to describe. It is not about inequality and fairness but about the corrosive tendency of markets. Putting a price on the good things in life can corrupt them. That is because markets don’t only allocate goods; they express and promote certain attitudes toward the goods being exchanged. Paying kids to read books might get them to read more, but might also teach them to regard reading as a chore rather than a source of intrinsic satisfaction. Hiring foreign mercenaries to fight our wars might spare the lives of our citizens, but might also corrupt the meaning of citizenship. Economists often assume that markets are inert, that they do not affect the goods being exchanged. But this is untrue. Markets leave their mark. Sometimes, market values crowd out nonprofit values worth caring about.

When we decide that certain goods may be bought and sold, we decide, at least implicitly, that it is appropriate to treat them as commodities, as instruments of profit and use. But not all goods are properly valued in this way. The most obvious example is human beings. Slavery was appalling because it treated human beings as a commodity, to be bought and sold at auction. Such treatment fails to value human beings as persons, worthy of dignity and respect; it sees them as instruments of gain and objects of use. Something similar can be said of other cherished goods and practices. We don’t allow children to be bought and sold, no matter how difficult the process of adoption can be or how promising impertinent prospective parents might be. Even if the prospective buyers would treat the child responsibly, we worry that a market in children would express and promote the wrong way of valuing them. Children are properly regarded not as consumer goods but as being worthy of love and care. Or consider the rights and obligations of citizenship. If you are called to jury duty, you can’t hire a substitute to take your place. Nor do we allow citizens to sell their votes, even though others might be eager to buy them. Why not? Because we believe that civic duties are not private property that can be bought and sold at auction. Such treatment fails to value human beings as persons, worthy of dignity and respect; it sees them as instruments of gain and objects of use.

These examples illustrate a broader point: some of the good things in life are degraded if turned into commodities. So to decide where the market belongs, and where it should be kept at a distance, we have to decide how to value the goods in question—health, education, family life, nature, art, civic duties, and so on. These are moral and political questions, not merely economic questions. To resolve them, we have to debate, case by case, the moral meaning of these goods, and the proper way of valuing them. This is a debate we didn’t have during the era of market triumphalism. As a result, without quite realizing it—without ever deciding to do so—we drifted from having a market economy to being a market society.

The difference is this: A market economy is a tool—a valuable and effective tool—for organizing productive activity. A market society is a way of life in which market values seep into every aspect of human endeavor. It’s a place where social relations are made over in the image of the market.

The GREAT MISSING DEBATE in contemporary politics is about the role and reach of markets. Do we want a market economy, or a market society? What role should markets play in public life and personal relations? How can we decide which goods should be bought and sold, and which should be governed by nonprofit values? Where should money’s seat not run?

Even if you agree that we need to grapple with big questions about the morality of markets, you might doubt that our public discourse is up to the task. It’s a legitimate worry. At a time when political argument consists mainly of shouting matches on cable television, partisan vitriol on talk radio, and ideological fights on the floor of Congress, it’s hard to imagine a reasoned public debate about such controversial moral questions as the right way to value procreation, children, education, health, the environment, citizenship, and other goods. I believe such a debate is possible, but only if we are willing to broaden the terms of our public discourse and grapple more explicitly with competing notions of the good life.

In hopes of avoiding sectarian strife, we often insist that citizens leave their moral and spiritual convictions behind when they enter the public square. But the reluctance to admit arguments about the good life into politics has had an unanticipated consequence. It has helped prepare the way for market triumphalism, and for the continuing hold of market reasoning. In its own way, market reasoning also empties public life of moral argument. Part of the appeal of markets is that they don’t pass judgment on the preferences they satisfy. They don’t ask whether some values of buying goods are higher, or worthier, than others. If someone is willing to pay for sex, or a kidney, and a consenting adult is willing to sell, the only question the economist asks is “How much?” Markets don’t wag fingers. They don’t discriminate between worthy preferences and unworthy ones. Each party to a deal decides for him- or herself what value to place on the things being exchanged.

This unjudgmental stance toward values lies at the heart of market reasoning, and explains much of its appeal. But our reluctance to engage in moral and spiritual argument, together with our embrace of markets, has exacted a heavy price: it has drained public discourse of moral and civic energy, and contributed to the technocratic, managerial politics affecting many societies today.

A debate about the moral limits of markets would enable us to decide, as a society, where markets serve the public good and where they do not belong. Thinking through the appropriate place of markets requires that we reason together, in public, about the right way to value the social goods we prize. It would be folly to expect that a more morally robust public discourse, even at its best, would lead to agreement on every contested question. But it would make for a healthier public life. And it would make us more aware of the price we pay for living in a society where everything is up for sale.
Democracy requires an openness to diverse opinion and a fostering of vigorous debate. But it also requires that each participant in that debate use his or her knowledge, experience, and judgment to make decisions for the public—not the partisan—good.
Cartoons of politicians falling off cliffs, financial or otherwise, aren’t new. This one, entitled Hanging On, shows President Taft climbing a mountain labeled “White House Island.” Members of his campaign committee hang from ropes attached to his waist. Illustration by Nilo J. Keppler, c. 1912 by Keppler & Schwarzmann, for Puck magazine, October 2, 1912. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-02781.

... simple solutions … the viewing of compromise as the real voyage of discovery consists not in an environment that rewards those who stand tenaciously on their principles and demonize their opponents,” Gutmann and Thompson put it very bluntly: “Members of Congress need to change their minds about compromise, or voters will need to change the members of Congress.”

There are also ways to encourage senators and representatives to think outside the confines of party identity. When new members of Congress are elected, they are offered several orientations, some of which are required but each of which offers some beneficial instruction. The Library of Congress offers instruction in the nuances of legislative rules and behaviors as well as helpful tips about hiring and managing one’s staff. I particularly remember ensues. When party leaders are given the additional authority to punish unfaithfulness, the compromise necessary for a functioning democracy disappears.

Are there ways, then, even given the current party system, to reduce partisanship and encourage more independent thinking? Marcel Proust wrote that “the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” If members of Congress continue to their tasks with eyes fixed firmly on their responsibilities as part of a political machine, we can expect no more from them than what we have been getting. But if we open their eyes to the bigger entity to which they owe loyalty, we can change their behavior. Two of the nation’s premier scholars, University of Pennsylvania President Amy Gutmann and Harvard professor Dennis Thompson, addressed the problem in a November 2011 op-ed in The New York Times. Noting that “there is no external escape from a political machine, our society, at the induction meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Calling compromise the “required practice” in our constitutional system, Souter noted that historian Jack Rakove had described compromise as the “necessary condition” that allowed the Founders to resolve the important differences that confronted them in Philadelphia. Constitutional lawyers, Souter said, “find it disquieting when the America polity seems to speak most loudly in terms of anti-compromise: that is, in terms of a rigid absolutism of principle on the part of one speaker or another, or indeed, on the part of one major political party or another.” He issued a dire warning, “How long can we expect the American people to support a Constitution that is demonstrably inconsistent with the daily practice of politics in American life?”

This problem becomes even more intractable in the context of a Congress divided between rival teams, each operating from its own “facts” and each in a position to come down hard on any teammate who thinks for himself and begins to question the accepted orthodoxy. Eric Hoffer, in The True Believer, noted the penchant of individuals to seek to belong to something larger than themselves, something transcendent, a cause to which they can devote themselves and in which they can place their faith. Writing in The New York Times Magazine in 1971, Hoffer observed that both absolute power and absolute faith demand “absolute obedience … simple solutions … the viewing of compromise as surrender.” When “true believers” are able to dominate a political party, for example through closed candidate selection processes, and can demand allegiance to their dogma, political rigidity continues. If “my side bias”—the tendency to judge a statement according to how conveniently it fits with one's settled position—is pervasive among all of America’s political groups.” In other words, given a set of possible conclusions, politicians, like the rest of us, will choose not the one that comports with dispassionate analysis but the one that fits their own preconceptions. This was a common occurrence during the Cold War, with one group of Americans arguing that deploying space-based defensive missiles would increase our security, and others arguing that such a provocative deployment would increase the chances of war. Does government spending hurt or harm economic growth? Do relaxed college admissions requirements help or hurt disadvantaged students? Everybody reading these questions will “know” the right answers, but the answers each of us gives will likely be the ones that fit our preconceptions about the proper role of government, the roles of nature and nurture, and the relative benefits of “tough love” and “comforting” love. We and our elected officials are operating from different ideas as to what the facts are. And while we may be willing to find common ground, we will do so within the facts we think we know. “My side bias”—choosing the “fact” that validates your side’s position—makes compromise almost inconceivable. If I know you are wrong, I can only try to stop you.
One's-Self I Sing

How the literature of Emerson, Whitman, Twain, Hemingway, and Kerouac gave voice to the American experience

BY LORI LINDSEY

Much like the people of America, the American character is an amalgam of heritages that spans time and place. The American character did not simply or suddenly appear; it formed over the course of decades. The open frontier and a spirit of independence and optimism took part in its formation. One of the greatest and most visible aspects of this American character is the philosophy of self-reliance. This singular strength of character is immediately evident in American literature.

According to one school of historians, American literature did not truly exist until the middle part of the nineteenth century. That is not to say that Americans did not publish, but rather that their writing was not distinctly American, relying too heavily on British and other European styles. As a whole, nineteenth-century Americans were optimistic and energetic about the future and exhibited many positive characteristics that twenty-first-century people think of as distinctly American: They truly believed that the best was yet to come. Americans were courageous because they believed that strength of mind, integrity, hard work, and a bit of luck would ultimately lead to some greater reward and a better life. The self-made man became the symbol of what was best and possible in the United States. This was the era of the common man, when equality was valued highly and seemed to permeate all aspects of American life—thought, action, belief, and interpersonal relationships.

Emerson’s definition of self-reliance calls for developing altruism: through self-reliance, one ultimately begins to think more about others and the universality of one’s actions. It is not merely the rugged individualism that later Americans would read into the concept. Emerson called for a close self-examination that leads people to see how their actions can impact others and increase the common good. Emerson delivered one of his most influential lectures, “The American Scholar,” for the Harvard chapter of Phi Beta Kappa in 1837. He observed that “meekest young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books.” Without downplaying the value of books, Emerson warns that Man the Thinker is better than the bookworm because the bookworm looks to the past. “But,” says Emerson, “genius looks forward: the eyes of man are set in his forehead: not in his hindhead: man hopes: genius creates.” Blindly accepting tradition, he warns, tramples the ability of brilliance to flourish. The way out is to perpetually and aggressively search for a tradition of one’s own making—to practice self-reliance.

Nineteenth-century Americans appreciated Emerson’s laudation of self-reliance because it was practical. Some critics claim that his philosophy led to the rampant materialism that began in the nineteenth century and continues to manifest itself today. They miss, however, the point he attempted to make. Emerson reasoned that if individuals trusted themselves, they could accomplish anything. Conforming to the majority would take away from their ability to think for themselves. The individual, in Emerson’s opinion, is at his highest capability when he is alone. Emerson’s ideas did not go unnoticed. Following his speeches and writings, Americans began to create their own distinct literature that exemplified American ideals and led to a distinct American literary voice. Authors such as Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and Jack Kerouac took Emerson’s concept of the true American and added their own innovations to reflect prevailing attitudes and concerns of their day. While the American experience changed over time, the basic premise that Americans are and should be self-reliant prevailed.

Prior to the 1820s, the United States had little to offer in terms of a unique American culture. The country’s reliance on European literature (and other markers of “true” civilization) changed with the publications and rising popularity of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson challenged Americans to look inward and to celebrate their strength and individuality. Industrialization, westward expansion, and the spread of democracy to include a greater segment of the population led many to embrace these concepts, placing Emerson as a central figure in the cultural history of American ideas.

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Mark Twain took Emerson’s ideas on the individual and Americanism and parlayed them into prose. Twain’s travels introduced him to the nuances in cultures across the country—the South, the West, the Mississippi River, the Northeast—intimate knowledge that allowed him to write convincingly about all of them, to rise above others in his vivid portrayals of the American experience. Twain’s writing was the first to use dialect and local speech. His voice was uniquely American and uniquely his own. His writing was simple, playing on humor, sarcasm, and exaggeration, but at the same time conveying deeper themes about man versus civilization and the dangerous side of humanity, reflecting the evolutions taking place in American culture.

Twain also paid attention to what was popular in American media and incorporated that into his narratives. By tapping into the interests of the country he ensured that his writing was widely read. His characters question society and make the right decision based on their own experiences and feelings. Though *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Roughing It*, and *Life on the Mississippi* explore self-reliance and individuality, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the fullest embodiment of this exploration and marks the apex of Twain’s career. The novel celebrates conscience and individuality while using the Mississippi River as a symbol of equality and freedom. When Huck is forced to decide whether Jim the slave should be treated like a human or like property, he chooses to follow his conscience because he cares less about the dictates of society than about being able to live with his decisions. Twain evokes Emerson’s ideal of self-reliance, in that Huck’s inner search leads to actions that benefit another human.

Walt Whitman was the first to capture Emerson’s entreaties to celebrate individualism and the American experience. If Emerson can be viewed as the godfather of American literature, Whitman should be the poet laureate for his influence on subsequent writers and literary movements. For most of his career, Whitman edited and revised his collection of poems called *Leaves of Grass*. Karen Karbiener of New York University notes that, in this work, Whitman wrote a literary declaration of independence by creating a style radically different from his predecessors. Strutted by the more traditional methods of form, rhyme, and meter, he pioneered the use of free verse—what he called a more “cosmopolitan” expression of language. Whitman’s rallying cry was that American poetry should personify Americans and inspire them; it should capture the movement and grandeur of the countryside and express the diversity of the American people.

Whitman’s work did many things for American literature, aside from celebrating American life. He used grass, a ubiquitous element across the country, as a symbol of democracy and equality, each “leaf” (a softer word than “blade”) is singular yet contributes to the whole. He also questioned the divisions of class, gender, and race, believing that such distinctions were irrelevant and actually ruinous to the American spirit. He challenged his readers to fulfill the great promise of the country by inspiring them to patriotism.

**One’s-Self I Sing**

One’s-Self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.
Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse, I say the Form complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing.
Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful, for freest action form’d under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing. —Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*
Jack Kerouac

Jack Kerouac’s writing set him apart from Emerson’s altruistic definition of self-reliance. Kerouac transcended the “American experience” and wrote of a “human experience,” even as he expanded upon the themes of “America” and “Americans.” Kerouac and his friends felt bored and confined by middle-class aspirations of the American Dream. They rebelled, leading a nomadic lifestyle as the ultimate expression of freedom and self-reliance: The journey, in and of itself, is what mattered.

Early on, Kerouac developed a habit of carrying around notebooks to record observations. He wrote his novels in very few sittings, with little planning or revision, asserting that it helped him capture life’s movement—a method he called spontaneous prose. The style revolutionized American letters, making way for the journalistic writing popularized in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As the voice of a new “Beat” literary movement, Kerouac developed a single character, focusing on that individual’s search for meaning. His road novels closely mirrored his personal search for enlightenment and freedom. The most famous of these novels is *On the Road*. Resistant to twentieth-century values of family and rootedness, Kerouac’s themes yearn for the rugged, independent individual of an earlier age. In a *New York Times Review*, Gilbert Millstein declared *On the Road* to be “beautifully executed” and predicted it would be the same kind of testament to its generation as Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* was to the “Lost Generation.”

But then they danced down the street like dingedoodles, and I shambled after as I’ve been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles explodging like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!”

— Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*
I'd like to suggest that Americans may not be as divided as we have been led to believe. Once we realize this, we might discover that civil discourse is possible. To demonstrate that we aren't so divided, let's examine a controversial social issue for which consensus continues to elude us: affirmative action—in particular, the form of affirmative action that allows institutions to tailor hiring or admissions policies to increase the representation of underrepresented groups. This issue is particularly relevant to Oklahomans, as Oklahoma voters passed State Question 759 in November 2012, the effect of which was to terminate state and local affirmative action programs in employment, education, and contracting.

By examining the arguments both for and against affirmative action, we will discover that even though Americans disagree over this issue, at a deeper, more fundamental level there is significant agreement. We will see that most Americans embrace the moral principles that underlie the arguments both for and against affirmative action. But first, it might be helpful to explain how moral and public policy “arguments” work.

**CONSTRUCTING THE ARGUMENTS**

In philosophy, issues are often examined with the use of arguments—specifically, a connected series of propositions or statements (called premises) meant to provide support or evidence for the validity of another proposition (the conclusion). This system is a useful tool when trying to justify or persuade others to accept a viewpoint or position. Most moral and public policy arguments contain two types of premises: moral and non-moral premises. If one wants to argue that a policy is moral (or immoral), one must include a central or primary moral claim which, when combined with non-moral claims (that make no statements about morality), leads to a moral conclusion. Let’s apply this method to the issue of affirmative action.

**THE ARGUMENT “FOR”**

A standard argument in support of affirmative action, usually referred to as the compensatory argument, can be articulated as follows.

1) Morality and/or justice dictate that those who were wrongfully harmed deserve to be compensated.
2) Women, blacks, and members of other groups were wrongfully harmed as a result of discrimination.
3) Therefore (from #1 and #2), morality and/or justice dictate that those women, blacks, and members of other groups who were wrongfully harmed as a result of discrimination deserve to be compensated.
4) Affirmative action is a fair form of compensation for those who were harmed as a result of discrimination.
5) Therefore (from #3 and #4), affirmative action is morally right and/or just.

Notice that premise #1 asserts the central moral claim: morality and/or justice dictate that those who were wrongfully harmed deserve to be compensated. Premise #2 says nothing about morality, rather, it is a non-moral claim concerning historical events. The first and second premises lead to the conclusion (premise #3) that those who were harmed deserve compensation. Up to this point, the argument says nothing about affirmative action. One could agree with the first conclusion and still oppose affirmative action. Hence (from #1 and #2), affirmative action is inconsistent with the argument in opposition to affirmative action can be articulated as follows:

1) Morality and fairness dictate that the principle of meritocracy ought to govern hiring decisions and school admissions.
2) Affirmative action is a denial of the principle of meritocracy.
3) Hence (from #1 and #2), affirmative action is morally wrong or unfair.

Premise #1 contains the central moral claim that motivates this anti-affirmative action argument. According to premise #2 (the non-moral statement), affirmative action is inconsistent with hiring/admissions policies based on merit. After all, affirmative action allows factors unrelated to merit, like ethnicity or gender, to be taken into account when deciding whom to hire for a job or admit to a school or university. If one embraces the first two premises of this argument, one should oppose affirmative action, right? As we’ll see, this isn’t necessarily true.

**SEEING BOTH SIDES**

Like other moral or public policy arguments, both sides of the affirmative action issue contain a central moral premise.

**Pro-affirmative action: Morality and/or justice dictate that those who were wrongfully harmed deserve to be compensated.**

**Anti-affirmative action: The principle of meritocracy is right or just.**

It is important to recognize that most of us embrace both of these central moral principles. If someone runs a red light and plows into our car, we claim that the driver who plowed into us should pay for damages. Why? Because we believe that people who were wrongfully harmed deserve to be compensated. Most of us also embrace the principle of meritocracy. If we discovered that the boss determined raises by drawing names from a hat, we might say that process was unfair.

I am not claiming that we both embrace and oppose affirmative action, although this may be the case. Rather, I’m suggesting that we embrace the moral principles in both arguments. Even though we may disagree over the issue of affirmative action, at a more fundamental level we do not disagree.

**WEIGHING THE CHOICES**

So, if supporters and opponents of affirmative action embrace
the same fundamental moral principles, what is the source of disagreement between them? It’s likely that, even if we believe the conclusions of both arguments, we attach more weight to one conclusion or the other.

Let’s look at another example. Imagine that two people disagree over whether they should feed their children fast food. Both parties may believe that fast food is unhealthy and that we shouldn’t feed unhealthy food to our children. They may also believe that fast food makes life easier for busy families, and it’s okay for parents to (sometimes) make use of this convenience. Even if the parties disagree over the issue of whether they should feed their children fast food, they may embrace the arguments in support of and in opposition to feeding children fast food. The source of their disagreement is in how much weight each puts on the premises or conclusions of each argument. One person may believe that making life easier is more important than eating a healthy diet, while the other might believe that a healthy diet trumps convenience.

Issues like this are interesting, because they reveal that opposing parties are not so far apart. Clearly, their moral codes are not very different from each other. Recognizing this increases the possibility for respectful moral discourse.

**PRINCIPLES VS. PRACTICE**

People can also disagree on premises other than the central moral claim. For example, those who oppose affirmative action might claim that it is not a fair way to compensate those who have been harmed. They may claim that affirmative action unjustly requires those who were not responsible to pay the price for past discrimination. Perhaps a white male believes that his family was not responsible for discrimination; in fact, his parents and grandparents were active in the movements for civil rights for blacks and women. Since he isn’t responsible for past discrimination and the harms resulting from it, he believes that it would be unfair to thrust the cost of compensation onto him; why should he have a lesser chance of being admitted to a competitive university just because he is white or male? Hence, he opposes affirmative action. This may be a legitimate objection to the compensatory (pro-affirmative action) argument, but it does not deny its central moral claim: that people who have been wrongfully harmed deserve to be compensated. And it doesn’t deny that they were discriminated against in the past. The disagreement between this opponent of affirmative action and the proponent concerns the issue of who is responsible for the compensation owed those who were harmed. In other words, they embrace the same moral principle—those who were wrongfully harmed deserve to be compensated—even though they disagree on the application of those principles.

Finally, let’s look at an example where someone supports affirmative action and the meritocracy argument. How is this possible? First, she might assert that even though the principle of meritocracy ought, in the ideal world, to guide hiring and admissions practices, we do not live in an ideal world. She might believe that those who were harmed as a result of discrimination ought to be compensated, but society implements solely meritocratic hiring and admissions. She may believe that once this debt is paid, affirmative action policies ought, in the present context, to be terminated. Or she might believe in meritocracy, but that affirmative action is not the only practice that violates the principle. (For instance, many people are admitted to top universities or get jobs because of the people they know. Surely, if my neighbor whose credentials are not as good as mine gets hired by a large company because he is a friend of the CEO, the principle of meritocracy is violated.) This person might believe that her support of affirmative action—which, in theory, is inconsistent with meritocracy—will cease when other violations of the principle of meritocracy are eliminated.

**FROM CONTROVERSY TO CONSENSUS**

And, so, we see that the foundational moral codes of those on either side of this issue are not very different. Die-hard opponents can actually embrace the moral principle of compensation, which underlies support for affirmative action. Similarly, those who uphold affirmative action may also value the principle of meritocracy that opposes the issue. If we examine the divisive issues of our day—abortion, conservation, immigration, and a host of other concerns—we will discover that we likely embrace the moral principles underlying the arguments on both sides of these issues. If we recognize that those on the opposite side of the political divide embrace moral principles that are similar to our own, we are less likely to see them as moral monsters. It becomes difficult to demonize them. Furthermore, when we recognize that those with whom we disagree are not very different, morally speaking, from us, we become more willing to engage in civil discourse. And we may come to believe that consensus concerning controversial issues is a possibility.

One of the characteristics of a healthy democracy is that we talk with each other, argue about the tough issues that confront us, and strive for consensus. Wouldn’t it be great if we could show politicians and pundits that it is possible to engage in these behaviors, even if we are more divided than ever? •

Scott D. Gelfand is an associate professor of philosophy at Oklahoma State University and a two-year program coordinator for the Writing Center at Oklahoma State University. He is a Tulsa resident and is currently working on a book that teaches people how to engage in respectful civil discourse.

**EXTRA!**

Link to discussion questions, podcasts, and more: okhumanities.org/extra

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Lori Lindsey is a freelance writer and blog contributor. She holds a master’s degree in History from Oklahoma State University and is currently working on a master’s in library science.

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one bit of advice that I never followed very well: your staff were told, there is to reduce your workload, not increase it. In other words, I was supposed to be giving them work to do; they weren't supposed to be giving me more work to do. That was fairly typical of the kinds of advice dispensed. After I left Congress and joined the faculty of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, I sometimes took part in orientation seminars conducted by the school’s Institute of Politics for newly elected House members. The institute’s seminars offered helpful tips about which committee positions to seek, means of increasing one’s influence in the House, and balancing time between Washington (where votes were to be cast) and one’s home district (where votes were to be won). These sessions also attempted to bring these new members of Congress up to speed on the state of the economy and on major legislation that would come before them in the coming session of Congress (technically, each new Congress starts from scratch but in reality new members are entering in the middle of the movie). Organizations like the Heritage Foundation put on their own seminars, geared toward members of a particular philosophical orientation. In an ideological lens.

The Parties Versus the People: How to Turn Republicans and Democrats into Americans

This text is excerpted by permission of the author from The Parties Versus the People: How to Turn Republicans and Democrats into Americans ( Yale University Press, 2012) by Mickey Edwards. Edwards, an Oklahoma U.S. Congressman for sixteen years and faculty member at Harvard and Princeton Universities for the subsequent sixteen years, is a vice president of the Aspen Institute. He has been a columnist for the Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, and other newspapers, and he has broadcast a weekly commentary on National Public Radio’s All Things Considered. He writes an online column for The Atlantic.

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continued from page 19

End Notes from the Editor

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It’s All in the Name
(and maybe a few letters after it …)

Our Executive Director, Ann Thompson, has a “thing” about using both our first and middle names. It’s all in good fun, but for the long time I wouldn’t tell her what my middle name is first. I’ve never been crazy about it and, second, it reminds me of childhood days at home, where the surest sign of being in trouble was hearing my middle name: “Carla Donna!” I come from a long line of –an rhyming names: Melba Dean, Billie Jean, Geraldine, Carla Dean … But I digress.

Ann also recently referred to me as an “amateur historian.” It’s closer to “reluctant historian,” but we’re both referring to the amount of time I spend fact-checking articles. Pay attention sometime to the number of authors and sources mentioned in any one magazine issue. Are the names spelled correctly? Are the years exact? Is every citation quoted precisely from the original work?

In the fact-checking process, a reference will inevitably bring up a question, which leads to searching through a textbook or studying a Supreme Court case or combing documents in the National Archives—hours and hours of reading and re-reading. Thank goodness we launched the magazine after the advent of the Internet.

We take pride in the integrity of scholarship in our pages, and we strive to bring you the most informed commentary we can find. Our goal is to earn your trust—and then keep it—issue after issue.

Lately I’ve been kvetching, “I should earn college credit for all these hours of independent study. Surely by now I have the equivalent of a master’s degree in something.” Joking aside, I learn every day more about literature and history and philosophy and ethics and jurisprudence. And I’d be lying if I didn’t say I love every minute of it.

Heads-up, university administrators: Which discipline and degree will you confer upon me? It must be something very broad and very deep, as are the humanities. I know—How about a “master’s of the universe”?

So … you can call me “Carla”; or you can call me “Carla Dean”; but whatever you call me, add the letters after, if you please.

Yours, Carla Dean Walker, MTU

THE PARTIES VERSUS THE PEOPLE
How to Turn Republicans and Democrats into Americans

Mickey Edwards

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Carla Walker, Editor
cw@okhumanities.org
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What Isn’t For Sale?
By Michael J. Sandel | Summer 2013 | Vol. 6, Issue No. 2

For Discussion
1. How did you react to the list of price tags in the article’s opening paragraphs? How has this trend manifested itself in your workplace and your community?
2. Among the list of price tags, which ones made you uncomfortable? Which ones made you curious about trying to profit from them yourself?
3. Is there anything wrong with using your body as a billboard, as long as it’s your choice to do so? If you’re doing it because you are in deep poverty, does this mean you really didn’t have a choice?
4. Where do you draw your own line in response to the question “What can’t money buy?”

EXTRA! Reading
• Michael J. Sandel, Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do? (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010). Shows how a surer grasp of philosophy can help us make sense of politics, morality, and our own convictions.

EXTRA! Links
• “Justice” with Michael Sandel (http://www.jusitceharvard.org/). Videos of Harvard University’s famed “Justice” course with Michael Sandel; subjects include justice, equality, democracy, and citizenship.
• EDSITEment, “The Industrial Age in America: Robber Barons and Captains of Industry.” Readings, discussion questions, and classroom resources on the rise of wealth in America and the questions that still apply today: Where do we draw the line between unfair business practices and competition that leads to innovation, investment, and improvement in the standard of living for everyone? Can market forces exert sufficient influence to rein in potentially harmful practices or does government have to intervene? (http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/industrial-age-america-robber-barons-and-captains-industry)

Resources are compiled by author(s) and editorial staff. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in these materials do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or the Oklahoma Humanities Council, its Board of Trustees, staff, or donors.
For Discussion
1. Read George Washington’s “Rules of Civility” [find links to online text below]. Would these rules help legislators today? If you could design your own modern rules of civility for Congress, what would they entail?
2. Give an example from American history in which opposing views in the U.S. Congress made a compromise. How would history have been changed if no compromise had been met?
3. How do media, social interactions, and other personal choices contribute to “myside bias”? As individual citizens, what steps can we take to minimize “myside bias”?
4. Discuss your answers to the author’s questions: Does government spending hurt or harm economic growth? Do relaxed college admissions requirements help or hurt disadvantaged students? After hearing opposing views, are you more or less likely to change your opinion?
5. To encourage cooperation, Benjamin Franklin told the Continental Congress that each member should “doubt a little of his own infallibility.” Do you think your opinions are always right—or, like Franklin, do you accept that you may, at times, be wrong?
6. If you were an elected official, are there issues of public policy on which you would not compromise?

EXTRA! Reading
• Mickey Edwards, The Parties Versus the People: How to Turn Republicans and Democrats into Americans (Yale Univ. Press, 2012). Discusses how the U.S. political system has become dysfunctional and suggests solutions to the negative effects of partisan warfare.
• Daniel B. Klien, “I Was Wrong, and So Are You,” The Atlantic, December 2011. Explains how our political leanings leave us more biased than we think. (http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/12/i-was-wrong-and-so-are-you/308713/)
• Jackson Turner Main, Political Parties Before the Constitution (Norton [published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, VA], 1974). Author analyzes national politics by studying the voting patterns of state legislatures in early America. Shows how issues of funding of debts, paper money, and land prices provided a battleground that divided legislators along two “parties” or factions.
• Robert V. Remini, At the Edge of the Precipice: Henry Clay and the Compromise that Saved the Union (Basic Books, 2010). Historian Robert Remini shows how Henry Clay’s recognition of the need for bipartisanship in times of crisis saved the Union. Watch video of Remini discussing the book at a National Archives event: (http://www.booktv.org/Watch/11464/Robert+Remini+19212013+At+the+Edge+of+Precipice+Henry+Clay+and+the+Compromise+that+Saved+the+Union.aspx)
**Extra Links**


- *Intelligence Squared U.S.*, Moderator John Donvan. This debate-style program shows civil discourse in action. It is filmed in New York and aired on NPR and PBS stations and as a live webcast. Among many topics, you can listen to a podcast or read a transcript from the April 2013 broadcast of “The GOP Must Seize the Center or Die,” in which Mickey Edwards and David Brooks argue *for* and Laura Ingraham and Ralph Reed argue *against* the following motion, as quoted from the show’s transcript [moderator John Donvan speaking]: The rules say that political parties cannot have power unless they first have our votes, and when they fail to get them, as the Republican Party did in sufficient numbers in the race to the White House in 2012, it inevitably sets off soul searching within the party. How did we fail to connect to the American voter? Do we need to change to do better next time? That is the debate that’s taking place right now inside the Republican Party, and we are bringing it out now onto this stage. Yes or no to this statement, “The GOP must seize the center or die,” a debate from Intelligence Squared, U.S. ([http://www.intelligencesquaredus.org/debates/upcoming-debates/item/801-the-gop-must-seize-the-center-or-die](http://www.intelligencesquaredus.org/debates/upcoming-debates/item/801-the-gop-must-seize-the-center-or-die))


- Museum of the Moving Image: ([http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/](http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/)). *The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2012* is an online exhibition presenting more than 300 television commercials from every election year since 1952, when the first campaign TV ads aired. Includes a searchable database, commentary, historical background, election results, and navigation organized by year, type of ad, and issue. Includes links to online resources and lesson plans.

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One’s Self I Sing: Writing the American Spirit
By Lori Lindsey | Summer 2013 | Vol. 6, Issue No. 2

For Discussion

1. Discuss other authors you have read (besides Emerson, Whitman, Twain, Hemingway, and Kerouac) that convey the themes of American individualism and self-reliance in their work. Compare and contrast the writing styles and philosophies with the five authors mentioned in Lori Lindsey’s article.

2. Which author(s), if writing today, would be a smash hit in contemporary American? What elements of their ideas, writing, or persona translate to modern American society?

3. Are the themes of individualism and self-reliance uniquely American—or do other cultures also value these ideals? Discuss the similarities and differences in how cultures express these characteristics.

4. What are the outcomes (the strengths and weaknesses) of our nation’s ideals regarding self-reliance and individualism? Do they contribute to the common good?

5. In the nineteenth century, the lack of instantaneous mass communication, geography, and poor transportation forced people to be self-reliant. What factors contribute to self-reliance and individualism today?

EXTRA! Reading

- Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880’s (Yale Univ. Press, 1959). Selected by the Organization of American Historians as one of the ten most significant works published in American history during the decade of the 1950s.
- Eric Foner and John A. Garraty, eds., The Reader’s Companion to American History (Houghton Mifflin, 1991). A portrait of the United States, from the origins of its native peoples to the nation’s complex identity in the 1990s; covers social history, critical events, issues, and individuals that have shaped our past.

EXTRA! Links

- Library of Congress: Search the Digital Collections (http://www.loc.gov/library/libarch-digital.html) and Teachers pages (http://www.loc.gov/teachers/index.html) of this rich national treasure for access to photos, historical documents, readings, lesson plans, and other links. Just enter your selected topic, person, time period, etc. in the search box.
- National Archives: Archival Research Catalog (ARC) (http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/). View photos and historical documents that span our nation’s history. Click the yellow “ARC Search” box on the left side of the page, which will take you to the search page; next, click the “Digital Copies” button at the top of the page, then enter your topic, person, place, etc. in the Search box.

(continued)
Ralph Waldo Emerson
- American Transcendentalism Web, Virginia Commonwealth University: Biography and annotated readings, online texts of Emerson’s work, and commentary and criticism on those works. (http://transcendentalism-legacy.tamu.edu/authors/emerson/index.html)

Walt Whitman
- The Walt Whitman Archive (http://www.whitmanarchive.org/about/index.html), University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Comprehensive collection of Whitman’s manuscripts, published writing, and letters; draws from libraries and collections around the world.
- Revising Himself: Walt Whitman and Leaves of Grass. This Library of Congress exhibit examines Whitman’s life and work with photos, manuscripts, diary pages, and artifacts. (http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/whitman-home.html)

Mark Twain
- EDSITEment (http://edsitement.neh.gov/): Enter “Mark Twain” in the search box to find links to lesson plans, readings, and websites.
- Mark Twain in His Times (http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/): website directed by Stephen Railton, University of Virginia. An interpretive archive, drawn largely from the resources of the Barrett Collection; contains texts and manuscripts, contemporary reviews and articles, images, and interactive exhibits.

Ernest Hemingway
- PBS, “Michael Palin’s Hemingway Adventure” (http://www.pbs.org/hemingwayadventure/index.html). Online exhibit drawn from the original broadcast series; features readings, lesson plans, bibliography, and links.
- John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (http://www.jfklibrary.org/): Enter “Ernest Hemingway” in the search box to view hundreds of digitized photos from the Ernest Hemingway Collection.

Jack Kerouac
- The Jack Kerouac Archive at The New York Public Library: Three-minute video on Kerouac (http://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/jack-kerouac-archive)
- NPR, Present at the Creation series, “Kerouac’s On the Road.” Correspondent Renee Montagne explores the story behind the novel’s creation. Features audio and video clips and links to web resources. (http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/ontheroad/#tapes)

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Civil Discourse in a Divided America
By Scott Gelfand | Summer 2013 | Vol. 6, Issue No. 2

For Discussion
1. How would you define “civil discourse”? What atmosphere, ethics, ideals, etc. are necessary to achieve civil discourse?
2. What were your views on affirmative action before reading Scott Gelfand’s article? Did his presentation of arguments change your thinking? Did he convince you that people on both sides of an issue can embrace the same moral principles?
3. Discuss other actions in our country’s history that state and federal government have taken to serve “the common good.” What were the long-term results of those actions?

EXTRA! Reading
- Peter Gilbert, “Doubt and Conviction,” I Was Thinking ... Travels in the World of Ideas (Wind Ridge Publishing, 2012). The author has generously provided free access to this essay [attached below].
- Judith Rodin and Stephen P. Steinberg, Eds., Public Discourse in America: Conversation and Community in the Twenty-First Century (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). Contributors consider whether rationality is the best standard for public discussion and argument, and isolate features that characterize an exemplary, more productive public discourse. Examines why public conversations work when they work well, and why they often fail when we need them the most.
- Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience.” EDSITEment (www.edsitement.neh.gov) has selected excerpts from “Civil Disobedience” and discussion questions to guide readers through Thoreau’s arguments. (http://edsitement.neh.gov/launchpad-henry-david-thoreaus-essay-civil-disobedience)

EXTRA! Links
- Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy (http://icdd.k-state.edu/primarytexts): Primary Texts page links to texts from political leaders, authors, and philosophers collected for the Institute’s class entitled Dialogue on Democracy.
- FREEDOM.OU.EDU: website of the Institute for the American Constitutional Heritage at the University of Oklahoma. Freedom 101 is an ongoing series of video explorations into American constitutional law and history. In Episode 4: Equal Protection: Affirmative Action, Dr. Lindsay Roberts explains the recent history of the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause as it applies to affirmative action. (http://freedom.ou.edu/lindsay-robertson-equal-protection-affirmative-action/)
- Teaching Tolerance: “Civil Discourse in the Classroom and Beyond.” Activities, worksheets, and readings explore dissent, discussion, and debate. Teaches students to turn unsubstantiated opinions into reasoned arguments and how to apply these skills in a variety of situations. Meets language arts, social studies, and life skills standards. PDF booklet may be downloaded. (http://www.tolerance.org/publication/civil-discourse-classroom)
• National Issues Forums (http://www.nifi.org/educators/index.aspx): Under the “Educators” tab you’ll find free readings, PowerPoint presentations, discussion questions, and lesson plans. Resources are equally relevant for community adult discussions and classroom use. Topics include: how to convene and moderate forums, and how to frame issues for productive civil discourse. Specific issues include: (1) “Working Through Difficult Decisions”; (2) “God and the Commons: Does Religion Matter,” which discusses the role of religion in public life; and (3) “Slavery or Freedom Forever: An Historical Issue Framing,” which illustrates the deliberative process using the frame of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, which determined the fate of slavery in U.S. territories.

• PLATO (Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization): Links to videos, radio podcasts, and readings on philosophy, ethics, and issues. (http://plato-apa.org/)

EXTRA! FOOD FOR THOUGHT

DOUBT AND CONVICTION

By Peter Gilbert

The critical balance between conviction and doubt in today’s volatile world

The intolerance of extremism is running rampant. It’s not just Al Qaeda. It’s murders of doctors at abortion clinics. It’s Timothy McVeigh, who saw himself as a modern-day John Brown and thought his attack on the Federal Building in Oklahoma City would inspire others to do likewise. It’s in the Middle East, and so many other places. You can see it in the total confidence that some people at both extremes of political or ideological spectrums have in the rightness of their views, confidence that can become self-righteousness. Perhaps it was ever thus.

Robert F. Kennedy observed that “[w]hat is dangerous about extremists is not that they are extreme but that they are intolerant.” That dangerous intolerance comes from their utter confidence in their means and ends.

In May of 1944, in the midst of World War II, New York City celebrated “I am an American Day” with speeches in Central Park. One speaker was Judge Learned Hand, a jurist so eminent that many called him the tenth Supreme Court Justice. He said, “The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the mind of other men and women … which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias …”

How do we teach our children to have the courage of their convictions on the one hand, and, at the same time, to keep open to the possibility that they may be wrong? That is a difficult, even metaphysical, challenge.

You see that mindset in Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was deeply, profoundly convinced that slavery was wrong and that the Union must be saved, and he gave his all for the cause. And yet he knew that the South, too, saw its cause as right. He does not judge the South. “It may seem strange,” Lincoln observed in his second inaugural address, “that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged.”

Despite this uncertainty, Lincoln concludes that the North should pursue the war to a successful conclusion: “[W]ith firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in....” Lincoln was a great president and great man because while wholly dedicated to his cause, he retained his humility.

The real world is not an ivory tower ethics seminar; it requires decisions—actions and reactions—often when there are no good choices. The challenge is to act out of one’s deeply held convictions but not to lose that speck of humility—of doubt—that checks our intolerance, keeps us open to others’ points of view, deters us from dehumanizing our enemies, and guards us against overstepping.


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