

Essay: Grant Oliphant, PRESIDENT, THE HEINZ ENDOWMENTS

WHO DO WE MEAN

BY “WE”?

When you come right down to it, that is the defining question of our times. When the history of this era is written, it will turn on how we answer this fundamental question: Who is inside our circle of caring, and who is excluded? Who really matters?

There are two narratives battling in America today to become the answer to that question. We think of them as political, but really they are archetypal.

One is the narrative of the siege. This storyline tells us that there is only so much dignity, opportunity and hope to go around. It positions us at the center of a pitched battle in which we and everything we care about are under attack by hostile forces whose only goal is to destroy and rob us of what is rightfully ours.

Every fable has its metaphor, and in this dark tale, it is a wall. We erect barriers to keep the invaders at bay and then turn on each other to root out the “otherness” already inside. In this narrative, we have already defined “we” too broadly, already invited in too much change. The logic of the siege tells us to shut it down and root it out, to revert to what is comfortable and known, to lock ourselves into fixed identities and old hatreds, to burn whatever resources we have because they belong to us and we can.

It is a chronicle of fear and scarcity. It warns us we live in a world of not enough and that the only way we can carve out a future is for “us” to triumph over “them.”

When the great psychologist and student of myth Carl Jung warned, “We are the origin of all coming evil,” this is what he meant, this insidious, suicidal notion that to save ourselves we must turn our backs on the world, our compassion inward, and our hostility on each other. The idea of “we” dwindles and narrows to something more like “I” — my people, my tribe, my religion, my politics.

The feminist poet Adrienne Rich nailed this a quarter of a century ago in her poem “In Those Years,” which begins:

In those years, people will say,
we lost track of the meaning of we, of you
we found ourselves reduced to I
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible:
we were trying to live a personal life
and, yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to.

Our capacity to bear witness to lives other than our own becomes sharply diminished in an era when

we convince ourselves—and allow others to convince us—that we are living inside the narrative of the siege. And the result is truly silly, ironic and terrible.

Our president tosses paper towels at American hurricane victims in Puerto Rico while lamenting not their suffering but the money they owe “us.” Political leaders who should see the massive storms that hit Houston, Florida and Puerto Rico this summer as proof of climate change instead deny the science and promise even greater subsidies for fossil fuel companies because it’s better for “us.”

Emboldened white supremacists move from online hideouts into open streets chanting racial slurs and vowing that those they hate will not replace “us.” People who see in themselves no hint of racism attack black athletes who take a solemn knee to peacefully protest police brutality for “disrespecting our flag” and being ungrateful to “us.” Legislators who offer only “thoughts and prayers” after every mass shooting blame and defund mental health services almost in the same breath yet refuse to consider the problem of guns because guns define “us.”

There is a universe in that word, “us.” Who it includes, who it doesn’t. Who is owed, who is not. Who has a place by right, who will never have a place no matter their merit.

In the storyline of the siege, “us” doesn’t include the past and the undue burdens we have inflicted on some members of our society through the legacy of discrimination and oppression. It doesn’t include the future, either, of all the children whose lives will be affected and diminished by the rising costs of avoidable climate change.

“Us” doesn’t include the refugees whose hunger, thirst, terror and misery will never be undone or contained by walls. It doesn’t include the immigrants whose talents and ideas could expand the pie we so feverishly guard as it dwindles around us. It finds scarce room for the black or brown, or the people whose religion, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation we deem “other” than our own. It doesn’t include those who protest or demand justice for their children

or a seat at the table of opportunity equivalent to what we imagine everyone enjoys inside our fraudulently inclusive circle of “us.”

This “us” doesn’t even include the people who already go to work every day building the industries of the future, the alternative energy companies that will sustain us and keep our planet habitable, the innovation businesses that will create new jobs to replace the legacy ones we all know are fading away. No, not even them. To acknowledge them would be to acknowledge that the siege is a myth and that we are captive only to our own fears.

But there is another narrative being told in America, the hopeful vision shared in these pages by just a few of the leaders we are privileged to work with every day. It is the narrative of community.

Anyone who has ever worked at a civic scale knows that community is no cuddly, vaguely wonderful thing. There is nothing tame or cute about it. It is at once glorious and hard to love. It is a rambunctious, complicated, ever-shifting coming together and pulling apart of all that is good and all that is awful in the human spirit.

But for all its gritty, messy reality, there is something transcendent about it. At its beating heart is the idea that we are better together than apart—that gathering as a diverse people is how we learn and grow, challenge old ideas and develop new ones, find the capacity to see beyond ourselves and our own narrow perspectives and needs. Science is learning what religion has long preached: It is in our relationship to others that we discover who we are, our place in the world, and our sense of purpose.

Empathy, connectedness, service to others—it turns out these are not mere lofty niceties. They are, rather, the very stuff of human progress and fulfillment, and even hold the secret to happiness. And they are simultaneously both the building blocks and the products of this thing we call community.

In the narrative of community, the notion of “we” is expansive, open and inviting. It encompasses people who live next door and people we have never met, people similar to us and people who seem completely alien. It teaches us the wisdom of the Jewish civil rights activist Joachim Prinz’s words when he said, “Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man’s dignity and integrity.”

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Joshua Franzos



Collective responsibility. The storyline of community challenges us to celebrate rather than shirk an ethic of giving to and paying for the society we want. It asks us to embrace our responsibilities to those who are vulnerable and new and different, not to the exclusion of anyone but rather to the benefit of everyone. Most of all it asks us to keep expanding our definition of “we,” to step away from the terrible, ironic silliness of terror-stricken self-interest and to bear witness to lives and challenges other than our own.

The polls and pundits tell us that we are a people irredeemably divided, that we have lost all common ground. It suits the siege-makers for us to believe this, but please don’t buy it. It only becomes true when we believe it.

In the refrain to his iconic song “Anthem,” Leonard Cohen urged:

Ring the bells that still can ring
 Forget your perfect offering
 There is a crack in everything
 That’s how the light gets in

That is the spirit of the people who every day still compose the tale of community, here and I suspect all across America. They have given up on nothing and their courage inspires. Through a thousand unsung offerings, each one a crack in the darkness, each one admitting a tiny ray of light, they help us see past our fears, past our differences, to the work yet undone, to a vision of community where “we” means all of us, where we all belong and we all can prosper. **h**