Restoring our Value of Acting for the Common Good

Recently a friend recommended that I read “The Common Good” by Robert Reich. He currently is Chancellor’s Professor of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, and a senior fellow at the Blum Center for Developing Economics and had served as Secretary of Labor under Clinton from 1993-7. Time named him one of the most effective cabinet secretaries of the 20th century. He has written at least 15 book with several being on the best seller list.

His premise is that we have lost the value of the common good that our forefathers left us. He defines the common good as “our shared values about what we owe to one another as citizens who are bound together in the same society which include a commitment to fundamental ideals and principles: respect for the rule of law and democratic institutions, toleration of our differences and belief in equal political rights and equal opportunity. This is clearly stated in the Preamble of our Constitution. “We the People of the United State in Order to form a more perfect Union establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America”. Noting the words in capitals, they clearly meant what they said.

Realistically we know that not all were included to have these rights. Yet over time the common good increasing included the majority of the people. As a teenager, I remember the words of John F. Kennedy in his inaugural speech in 1961. “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your county”. He was reminding each of us that we, too, had a responsibility to maintain the common good. In the following 10 years we saw legislation that expanded human rights and groups standing up for others.

Somehow in the 1970’s a change began to occur with the shift to Me. We have a “whatever it takes to win political philosophy”. Policies have been past to allow huge amounts of money to given to candidates to support only their view points, lobbyists have had the same increase to keep that support. Consequently little gets done as each side can only support their views. The checks and balances in our constitution are not working because branches of the government simply refuse to do their job.

Secondly, in the business world, we have “whatever it takes to maximize profits”. Previously big businesses not only had responsibilities to its shareholders, but also the wellbeing of its workers, the customers, and community. In 2010 Mike Douglas as Gordon Gekko stated “Greed is Good”. This me philosophy has allowed so many to manipulate regulations to bring them great wealth at the cost of the rest. Finally the press has also bought into that policy of making money. Negative news sells.

For Reich it was imperative that we as country and people find our way back to the common good value and had some suggestions as to what needs to be done. Before addressing these, I feel it is important that I emphasize several points. First and foremost I know that there are many of us who still believe and act every day for the common good. Communities help each other every day. The tragedy is that the Me/Greed/Anything Goes is the prevailing message that we hear and see on a daily basis through our mass and immediate media. A message of common good is not spoken. Consequently, we are going moving further way from common.

His first suggestion is that “Leadership must entail trusteeship”. Our president, legislators, judges, head of business and media are stewards of our Preamble. Their goal is not to win nor get their way, but it is to SERVE. As citizens we need to insist that their job is to secure the common good.

Secondly we need to abide by our laws and values and honor those who are doing what our forefathers intended. Those that are not, they need to be appropriately shamed rather than a mere slap on the hand or worse honor them. Right and wrong need to be clear.

Lastly he advocates civic education for all. Education appears to not be giving our young that civic virtue and education needed to protect our common good.

I would encourage you to read this book and then let not only our leaders, but your family, friends and neighbors know that you want our country to protect the Common Good and civility.

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