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Notes from editor (not for publication):



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 How civics can lead to something greater

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3 TEXT BODY:

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4 HERE ARE SOME grim statistics.

5 • One in three Americans do not know there are three
6 branches of government.

7 • More than half do not know the number of members in
8 the House of Representatives.

9 The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which conducted the
10 2024 survey, came up with a plan. The Civic Trust is a program
11 designed for the American workplace that “gives employers the

12 tools and resources they need to elevate civic knowledge, skills,
13 and disposition.”

14 Employees explore how power is shared through
15 federalism, how arguments are channeled through separation of
16 powers, and how to engage with different points of view in the
17 workplace. Along the way, employees and management learn
18 that the House currently has 435 members.

19 Civic knowledge, skills, and disposition are the three legs
20 of stable political society. Too often civic education just focuses
21 on the first two, as if character development is not a matter of
22 common concern.

23 But lately people are starting to notice that a lack of
24 moral gravitas in the general population may explain our current
25 poisonous political discourse.

26 * * *

27 OUTSIDE MINNEAPOLIS, Eagle Ridge Academy teaches
28 civic virtue through great works of religion, literature, and
29 philosophy. Students at the charter school wear uniforms, stand
30 when they speak, and walk single-file down the hallway.

31 They also learn to have the kind of conversations where
32 real differences of opinion are necessary in order to get below the
33 surface of a question. The books stand at the heart of the
34 curriculum, providing a moral quandary that is complex enough
35 to elude any easy answer. The point is to wrestle with the
36 problem. To do that well, takes a willingness to zoom way out to
37 see the biggest question.

38 James Traub, who [reported](#) on Eagle Ridge for *The New*
39 *York Times*, was candid about his initial skepticism about a
40 classical education. Was it really the school’s role to cultivate the
41 moral development of children? But as he listened to a class of
42 ninth graders discuss Aeneas’s betrayal of Dido, he began to have
43 second thoughts.

44 It was Aeneas’s fate to rebuild Rome. Was he being
45 honest with Dido about his larger responsibility?

46 When one student noticed that a girl hadn't said
47 anything, she asked, "What do you think?" And the girl
48 answered.

49 These students, wrote Traube, had developed the "habit
50 of thinking in serious moral terms."

51 CIVIC VIRTUE is not just getting attention in classical
52 schools. Over 90,000 middle- and high-school teachers are
53 making use of the Bill of Rights Institute's curriculum, which
54 focuses on nine civic virtues, connecting the natural rights listed
55 in the Constitution to the habits of good citizenship.

56 Students explore: What sort of Courage is required when
57 declaring an unpopular view? How does one balance Humility
58 with a strong sense of Justice? Difficult policy questions morph
59 into larger philosophical questions when considered through the
60 lens of a civic virtue. One could argue as if your opponent were
61 stupid, but where is the Honor in that?

62 Besides workplaces and classrooms, there are other
63 places to practice civic virtue. The Constitution singles out juries
64 as playing a particularly important role in moral development.
65 Alexis de Tocqueville [described](#) juries as a "gratuitous public
66 school," where ordinary people learned how to judge whether or
67 not a thing was right. "By obliging men to turn their attention to
68 affairs which are not exclusively their own," he wrote in
69 *Democracy in America*, it rubs off that individual egotism which
70 is the rust of society."

71 The Civics Trust has an entire curriculum focusing on the
72 work of juries.

73 Unfortunately, fewer than 5% of cases go to trial.
74 Proponents of the decline of the jury point to the amount of time
75 and resources a jury trial requires. We are told that the average
76 juror is biased and irrationally punitive.

77 That may be so. The question remains, however, what
78 other free public school are we offering to reduce the rust of
79 individual egoism? Where can those of us who aren't in school,

80 aren't employed at a civics-minded business, or serving on a jury
81 think about political matters in serious moral terms?

82 * * *

83 IN MR. LEMON'S class the big question was "Was Aeneas
84 right to abandon Dido?" In our polarized times, when many
85 people claim to speak Truth to Power, we need places where we
86 can challenge one another to be more courageous.

87 In a Blue corner of a Blue state, it does not take much
88 courage to criticize Republicans. It does take courage to question
89 the political strategies of one's own side. Feminists, for instance,
90 are practicing courage when they question some of the strategies
91 of #MeToo.

92 "Every school says it encourages civil discourse and
93 mutual respect," Traub writes in his piece on Eagle Ridge. "But
94 that can be the pre-condition for something greater."

95 "Something greater" means wrestling with the big
96 questions in order to develop the habits of specific civic virtues.
97 In the Vermont constitution, those virtues include justice,
98 moderation, temperance, industry, and frugality. In New
99 Hampshire, they include sincerity, sobriety, and "all social
100 affectations, and generous sentiments."

101 We come together to wrestle with the common problems
102 of our time, not to showboat or dominate but to become the
103 more perfect persons that our founding documents celebrate.

104 * * *

105 FOR THOSE WHO are interested in exploring how morality
106 might improve our politics, I'll be leading a series of discussions
107 at the Putney Public Library on Thursday evenings in July.

108 The free discussions, supported by a grant from the
109 Vermont Humanities Council, begin at 6:30 p.m. We'll wrestle
110 with some of the hot button issues in Vermont, including
111 affordable housing and tensions between religious liberties and
112 non-discrimination statutes.

113 The goal won't be to win or to vanquish one's opponent
114 but to build dispositions toward our common life.

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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115 **MEG MOTT** (megmott.com) is a professor emerita,
116 former town moderator, and self-described Constitution Wrangler
117 and Good Clash Provider.

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LINKS:

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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