

“Renewing the American Democratic Faith”*

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We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

Declaration of Independence, 1776

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, 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.

Preamble, U.S. Constitution, 1787

The founders of the United States of America embarked on an audacious experiment. Could a diverse people given individual freedom and political sovereignty work together to build a unified nation that promotes freedom and advances equality, justice, and the common good? Aware of the fallibility of human nature, many of the founders had serious doubts. They knew that freedom and self-interest would always exist in tension with the ideals of justice and the common good. Nevertheless, they had the faith and courage to persist with the experiment. Their hopes for creating a free, self-governing society rested on the possibility of establishing an innovative constitution with checks and balances that recognizes certain inalienable human rights. They also believed that if the American experiment was to succeed, it would require a moral and spiritual foundation. Essential to the flourishing of a free society, they argued, are shared moral and political ideals leading to a way of life that involves a strong sense of national solidarity, social responsibility, and engaged citizenship. Even though the founders lived in a very different world from ours, their thinking in this regard is one key to rectifying the deficits in our democratic practice in the twenty-first century.

In recent decades, the United States has become a deeply divided and fragmented nation unable to address pressing social, economic, environmental, political, and international challenges. There is an urgent need to reawaken a shared faith in unifying democratic ideals and values that can provide the nation’s people, in all of their cultural diversity, with an inspiring sense of a national identity and common destiny. From the beginning, what has defined the American people as Americans has been their shared

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moral and political ideals, which is not to deny the history of repeated attempts by some Americans to marginalize others on the basis of race, religion or ethnic origin. A revitalized democratic faith can help to focus the nation on the task of advancing social and economic justice and creating and implementing a compelling, inclusive vision of the common good. This essay explores the ideals and values that formed the early moral and spiritual foundations of the nation and offers reflections on pathways to a renewal of American democracy.

Historians, sociologists, and philosophers have adopted different ways of describing America's moral and spiritual foundations. They refer, for example, to the American creed, a creedal national identity, the American Covenant, American civil religion, Americanism, the democratic faith, moral democracy, spiritual democracy, and a public moral philosophy. Walt Whitman, John Dewey, and Jane Addams get to the heart of the matter when they conceive of democracy as first and foremost a great moral ideal. It is with this understanding that this essay identifies the nation's deepest foundations with a faith in shared ideals and a personal way of life along the lines envisioned in Dewey's A Common Faith.¹ Faith in an integrated vision of ideals and values involves wholehearted commitment to a way of being and relating to the world. When the American democratic faith possesses a person's mind and heart, it can become a relational spirituality that integrates spiritual life and everyday life.

I. The Ideal and the Real

In the midst of significant ethnic and religious diversity there emerged with the American Revolution of 1776 and the subsequent founding of the republic a set of shared moral and political ideals, which were set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble of the Constitution. Among the ideals affirmed in these documents by "We the people" are freedom, equality, individual rights, the pursuit of happiness, the sovereignty of the people, the rule of law, justice, the common good, peace, unity in the midst of diversity, and intergenerational responsibility. James Madison, credited with being the principal drafter of the Constitution, explained that "the public good, the real welfare of the great body of the people, is the supreme object to be pursued."² The Constitution is a secular document that makes no reference to God, prohibits the establishment of religion by the government, and proclaims freedom of religion as a basic right. The Declaration of Independence, however, does affirm the widely held eighteenth century faith in God as the Creator who has endowed "all men" with equal dignity and inalienable rights.

America's founding ideals were set forth as self-evident truths and universal values that all can know and understand through rational reflection and an awakened conscience. For many they were sacred truths that promised liberation from the oppression, conflicts, and burdens of life in the Old World. "We have it in our power to begin the world over again," wrote Thomas Paine in Common Sense, his widely debated tract in support of revolution. America was the New World. Further, in the spirit of the eighteenth century Enlightenment movement, many of the founders adopted a cosmopolitan worldview and, like George Washington, saw no conflict between being a

patriotic American and identifying as “a citizen of the great republic of humanity at large.”³

There have, however, always been contradictions between America’s aspirational founding vision and the reality that is American society. Moreover, there were complex problems with what the founders succeeded in accomplishing, revealing ways in which the colonists had not left behind the attitudes and practices of the Old World. Women were not understood to possess the rights of men. It would take 150 years of protest by women for the nation to adopt the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted them the right to vote. The 1787 Constitution does not recognize the rights of Native Americans for whom the European settlement of North America was a catastrophe. They were driven from their lands, forced onto reservations, and in the process suffered the destruction of their cultures and the denial of their livelihood with devastating long term consequences. It was not until 1924 that Native Americans were granted the right to vote. The Constitution allowed the continuation of slavery, and Congress was prohibited from outlawing the slave trade for twenty years. The first African slaves arrived on the shores of North America in 1619, and by the time the Constitution was ratified by the thirteen states in 1791 there were over 700,000 enslaved persons in the new nation. During the second half of the eighteenth century the debate over slavery became intense. Founders like Benjamin Franklin, president of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, and many citizens of the new republic viewed slavery as an atrocity that should be abolished. The Constitution did permit the states to outlaw slavery, and it was outlawed in the New England states by 1791.⁴

Leaders like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who owned plantations and were slaveholders, could not escape having to face the fact that slavery presented a terrible moral dilemma, and they feared that the nation would suffer grave consequences if it were not ended. Washington did grant his slaves their freedom in his will. However, he and Jefferson knew that if faced with abolition, some of the southern states, whose agricultural economies were built on slavery, would refuse to join the Union. The nation was created deeply divided over slavery, leading tragically within a relatively short time to the Civil War (1861-1865) that took the lives of over 600,000 men and left much of the country in ruins. Only then did Congress adopt the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution abolishing slavery, granting African-American citizens “the equal protection of the laws,” and granting African-American men the right to vote. It was in many ways a second founding of the nation. However, confronted during the Jim Crow era with brutal systems of racial segregation and discrimination, including denial of education, jobs, and the right to vote, the struggle of African-Americans for their freedom and rights was far from over. A hundred years after the Civil War, the civil rights movement would generate massive protests over long denied justice that would force major change, but in the twenty-first century the persistence of discrimination and the need for healing remain critical issues facing the nation.

The general principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble of the Constitution remain among the most powerful, transformative social and political ideals ever articulated. However, given the prevalence of ignorance, the strength

of narrow self-interest, and the corrupting influence of money and power, advancing freedom, equality, and justice is a never-ending task. Real progress has been and can be achieved, but intolerance and injustice inevitably reappear as human civilization evolves. America has always been a work in progress, and its founding ideals express the unfulfilled promise of American life and function as a force driving social change. Langston Hughes, the Harlem Renaissance poet, spoke for all marginalized groups in the nation when in 1935 he wrote: “Let America be America again. Let it be the dream it used to be... The land it never has been yet – And yet must be...” Each generation faces the challenge of renewing the nation’s faith in its founding moral and political ideals and striving to give fresh expression to what that faith and commitment to the common good means.

II. Freedom, Virtue, and the Common Good

At the time of the founding of the nation, biblical religion, especially the prophetic call for compassion and social justice, was a major source of moral and spiritual inspiration. The Puritans, who settled New England in the seventeenth century, are sometimes called the first founders, and “Puritanism provided the moral and religious background for fully three quarters of the people who declared their independence in 1776.”⁵ The Puritans were Protestant Christian reformers bent on purifying the church and transforming society. In seeking to understand themselves and their mission, they drew heavily on biblical narratives and language. America was the new Promised Land. Their destiny was to create a New Israel in America founded on a new Covenant between God and his people. They were especially mindful that in the biblical narrative God’s liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt is followed by revelation of the law and establishment of the Mosaic Covenant at Mt. Sinai. In short, the Puritans like the ancient Hebrews believed that freedom must be harnessed and guided to become a force for the good.

The Puritan’s spiritual and moral idealism has had an enduring influence. Most of us want to believe that America is a unique nation with a higher moral purpose. George Washington reflected this idealism when in his Farewell Address he stated: “It will be worthy of a free, enlightened... nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.” In addition, from Jonathan Edwards’ call in 1630 to build “a city upon a hill” to Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address to Martin Luther King Jr.’s civil rights movement speeches on the American dream, reformers and political leaders have used biblical ideals and themes to interpret the meaning of American history and to inspire change.⁶

Prior to the Revolution there was much discussion in the colonies about republicanism as a form of government and way of life that provided an alternative to British monarchical society with its rigid social hierarchy characterized by inequality, dependence, and subordination. A republic is a self-governing society without a king in which the supreme power resides with those recognized as citizens who enjoy a certain measure of freedom and equality and elect their own government leaders.⁷ Many of the founders were influenced by ancient models of republican government, especially Athens

and Rome, as well as by more contemporary experiments with republicanism. It was republican ideals and values, which were embraced by the Enlightenment movement, that gradually undermined support for monarchical society in the colonies leading eventually to revolution.⁸ The goal of those involved in drafting the Constitution was to establish the United States as a modern republic sustained by both Christian and classical moral values.

The founders believed that the republic they were creating would require independent, visionary leaders with exceptional intelligence and moral integrity and citizens with a high level of moral and social responsibility. In this regard, they emphasized the vital importance of virtue as the guide to individual fulfillment and social well-being. In accord with the Socratic tradition, they identified virtue with wisdom, knowledge of the good – the product of practical experience, rational inquiry, and deep experiential insight. In the republican tradition, the defining characteristic of civic virtue is devotion to the common good, and its highest expression is self-sacrifice for the general welfare. For the founders, who aspired to create a new, enlightened moral and social order, a love of virtue and wisdom and a liberal arts education were essential to sound political leadership.

The federal and state constitutions manifest a qualified trust that the citizens of the new republic would have the intelligence and moral responsibility to elect good leaders. The founders did fear that self-interest could generate a divisive factionalism and anarchy, leading to new forms of tyranny. To guard against such a development they insisted that certain cultural conditions be established, including access to a basic education and information on public affairs. The state constitutions limited the vote to tax paying, male property holders. In addition, most of the founders agreed with George Washington when in his Farewell Address he asserted: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.” Washington understood that shared moral values underlie respect and support for the law, and he believed that religion and the love and fear of God are necessary to sustaining a commitment to “the national morality.” He considered “wisdom and virtue” to be “the great pillars of human happiness” and “the foundation of the fabric... of free government.”⁹

The founders were realists about human nature. They were well aware of the Christian doctrine of the universality of sin and of the warnings in classical philosophy regarding the corrupting power of the passions. For this reason they crafted a constitution that divided sovereignty between the federal government and the thirteen states, constructed a federal government with a separation of powers and checks and balances, and protected freedom of speech and the press. It was an innovative system of government carefully designed to prevent the centralization of power in the hands of any individual leader or group. Defending the Constitution, Washington declared: “A just estimate of that love of power, and proneness to abuse it, which predominates in the human heart, is sufficient to satisfy us of the truth of this position.”¹⁰

The founders' republican philosophy also emphasized the interrelation between the realization of freedom, the nurturing of virtue, and citizen engagement in the process of self-government. Republicanism regards humans as social and political beings who find themselves and thrive in and through their relationships and as members of self-governing communities. People may be born with an inalienable right to liberty, but they also need each other and are interdependent. In this tradition, autonomy is a prized value, but there is understood to be no inherent contradiction between freedom and respect for the law. For the revolutionaries, political independence meant living in a society governed by the rule of law as opposed to the arbitrary will of a tyrannical monarch. Further, personal freedom meant more than the absence of restraint. Someone in the grip of delusion and blind passion was not considered to be free. The defenders of republican values taught that becoming a truly free person requires self-knowledge, self-discipline, and the wisdom and will to pursue what is good and just.

In addition, human beings naturally aspire to be part of something greater than their own self-interest, and the founders believed that people realize their full potential as free persons in and through engaged citizenship – working collaboratively with fellow citizens to protect their rights and to advance shared goals. They viewed active participation in self-government and other forms of public service in civil society as the primary way independent citizens acquire a sense of belonging to a community, are educated about public affairs, and develop the virtues and skills needed to deliberate productively and cooperate in advancing the common good.¹¹ Here was a way of shared life that promised to nurture and strengthen a sustaining, spiritual sense of connection, meaning, and purpose.

III. Equality and the Democratic Way of Life

The result of the Revolution was a far-reaching reconstruction of American society that gave birth to the dream of a new democratic culture. It is the original American dream of what America could be. In this new democratic, moral, and spiritual ethos is found the only sure foundation for the flourishing of the nation's political democracy. Again and again the nation has strayed from this understanding, and it finds itself anew by rediscovering its foundational moral and spiritual ideals, what Alexis de Toqueville described as those "habits of the heart" that create authentic community.

The two most powerful American ideals driving revolutionary change are the principles of freedom and equality. Freedom has been America's most cherished ideal, "the holy light," celebrated in the nation's statues of liberty and in song, sermons, protests, and political rhetoric. However, when reduced to a self-centered individualism, freedom undermines equality, the general welfare, and democracy itself. The ideal of equality is "the most radical and most powerful ideological force let loose in the Revolution."¹² Freedom and equality together with the ideals of individual rights, the rule of law, justice, and the common good are the fundamental values at the heart of the spiritual and ethical vision that expresses the true spirit and deeper meaning of American democracy.

One major influence shaping the spiritual and moral thinking that would over many centuries eventually lead to the American concept of equality is found in biblical religion. The Book of Genesis proclaims that human beings are created in the image of God, recognizing the immeasurable, intrinsic value and dignity of each and every person. The basic moral teaching of the ancient Hebrew prophets is the imperative to do what is right, good and just and to avoid evil. The most concise, general formulation of what this means is set forth in the Bible's Golden Rule, which calls on us to treat others with a certain equal moral consideration. God commands the people of Israel: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18) Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount summarizes the principle as follows: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12) This very general ethical principle invites us to identify with the other as a person who shares with us a common humanity and who like us seeks happiness and wants to avoid suffering. It encourages an attitude of empathy and sympathy. It is the imperative to treat all persons as an end and never as a means only. The clear implication of the principle is that one should strive to help others and avoid harming them.

In the West, the Golden Rule was promoted by the Christian and Jewish traditions, but it is a universal ethical principle that finds expression in many different religions and cultures around the world. Further, it is a very general ethical principle that tells us what to think about when we are trying to decide what to do, but it does not tell us exactly what to do in any specific situation. The implications of the principle are interpreted differently by diverse cultures and generations. As the ethical consciousness of a people expands and becomes more tolerant and inclusive, their understanding of these implications can change dramatically as is happening with contemporary efforts to end discrimination of all kinds.

In the new republic, equality meant rejection of the notion that one's worth and social standing as a person are determined by birth and class. "Ordinary Americans came to believe that no one in a basic down-to-earth and day-in-and-day-out manner was really better than anyone else. That was equality as no other nation has ever quite had it," asserts the American historian, Gordon Wood.¹³ The core notion in the American ideal of equality is the moral principle that all people in the midst of their diversity share a common humanity and are born equal in dignity and all, therefore, are worthy of respect and moral consideration. Right relationship begins with recognition of the inherent and equal dignity of other persons as human beings like oneself. In the eighteenth century, it was, of course, primarily men, and not all men, who were recognized as equal. However, if the American story has a moral meaning, to a large extent it is found in the ongoing, contentious process of working out the full implications of the idea that all human beings are "created equal."

Equality and liberty are interrelated ideals. The principle of equality meant to the revolutionaries that all white male citizens should be free in the sense of independent and autonomous, able to think and decide for themselves. Further, inherent in the ideals of equality and freedom is the belief that all should have the opportunity to develop their abilities and pursue their aspirations. Moreover, it was widely understood that with

freedom and opportunity goes an obligation to strive to realize one's potential and to contribute according to one's talents to the life of the nation. Equality of opportunity meant that all careers, including leadership in government, should be open to any white man with the self-discipline, intelligence, and virtue required. The revolutionaries were not interested in leveling society and eliminating all economic inequality. However, they did believe that a large gap between the rich and the poor is a destabilizing force in a republic, and they strongly opposed the development of an aristocracy in America. It was their expectation that equality of opportunity would create more equitable economic conditions, but they did not foresee the dramatic way in which capitalism would increase economic inequality.

Respect for the equal dignity of other persons includes respect for their basic rights. The concept of individual rights had a long history in England stretching from the thirteenth-century Magna Carta to John Locke's liberal defense of the equality and natural rights of all men in the seventeenth century. Initially the concept of rights and liberties was developed as a way to secure protection for the people from the arbitrary power of monarchs and the abuse of power by governments. However, as the human rights tradition has developed, the vision of humanity's civil, political, economic, and social rights has also become an essential part of the vision of what constitutes the common good. Human rights clarify the basic conditions necessary for the flourishing of freedom, equality of opportunity, self-government, and full human development.

It was the hope of the revolutionaries that the spirit of freedom coupled with cultivation of mutual respect among the American people would open new pathways to authentic community and national unity. The goal was *E Pluribus Unum*, out of many one. The Enlightenment movement taught that when the inborn moral and spiritual capacities for empathy, sympathy, and love are supported and nurtured, people are naturally drawn to form friendships, cooperate, and build community. As they abandoned the old monarchical social order and looked for new ways to hold the American people together and build "a more perfect Union," many of the revolutionaries envisioned the spirit of freedom and equality being infused with these natural feelings of sympathy, love, and benevolence, creating the new social ties and bonds needed.¹⁴ George Washington expressed this ideal in his "Farewell Address" when he envisioned a nation "bound together by fraternal affection." Encouraged that the end of the Civil War was in sight and the Union would prevail, Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address endeavored to restore this spirit with his concluding words: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the newly created republic very rapidly underwent a major democratic transformation. In the midst of an enormous release of creative energy, the franchise was steadily expanded. Men from all walks of life with a host of different interests, not just the highly educated and public spirited, were elected to serve at all levels of government. In this regard, historians describe a

transition from the republicanism envisioned by the founders to the kind of fractious democratic republic that has existed ever since. It is not, however, the purpose of this essay to explore this history. It remains to consider the contemporary relevance of the founders' revolutionary ideals and dreams.

IV. Radical Individualism and the Fraying Moral Fabric of Society

We live in a highly complex industrial-technological society linked with a global civilization that the founders, who traveled on horseback and illuminated their homes with candlelight, could never have imagined. Nevertheless, we can still benefit from their republican social and political philosophy, especially their understanding of freedom and firm belief that a free society requires a foundation of shared moral and political ideals to hold the nation together at all levels. In recent decades, however, the influence of the founder's republicanism has waned, and, as Michael Sandel, the political philosopher, explains, there is a widespread sense "that from family to neighborhood to nation, the moral fabric of community is unraveling around us."¹⁵ In "A Report to the Nation," the Council on Civil Society states that "the core challenge" facing America is "the moral renewal of our democratic project." The Council Report asks: "What are those ways of life that self-government requires? What are those qualities the Constitution presupposes in the American people? They are precisely those qualities that are currently disappearing from our society."¹⁶ As the bonds of community have frayed, the safety and wellbeing of children has declined, increasing numbers of people struggle with loneliness, depression, and drug addiction, suicide rates keep climbing, and the nation's politics become ever more abrasive. There are many contributing factors to this moral and spiritual crisis, including economic inequality, the internet, and social media. However, the most fundamental underlying cause is the culture of radical individualism that became widespread in the wake of the 1960s.¹⁷

Radical individualism involves the notion that the self exists as a separate entity independent of other selves and society. It makes the autonomous self, not the community, the center of the individual's world. Freedom is defined simply as the absence of restraint and the ability to do whatever one desires. Radical individualism values personal achievement over social relationships. It emphasizes being faithful to one's own personal values, but it also involves the notion that a person is not bound by any moral obligations or civic duties that the individual has not chosen to embrace. This brand of individualism may lead to a personal spiritual quest, but it also has generated a culture of narcissism and consumerism and a secular moral relativism that considers moral judgments to be just subjective personal preferences. One implication of this outlook is liberal neutrality, the widespread idea that government should be neutral regarding any particular set of moral and spiritual values beyond respect for human rights, tolerance, and fair procedures for resolving conflicts.

The weakening of the bonds of community and the social fragmentation created by radical individualism have been further complicated in recent decades by the rise of identity politics, which divides society into an ever-increasing number of minority groups

who feel deep resentment over how they have been marginalized and oppressed. Many in these groups have grown disillusioned with having faith in traditional American ideals. On the one hand, identity politics has focused attention on real injustices suffered by women, Native Americans, African-Americans, immigrants, and LGBT people. On the other hand, identity politics is a force generating new forms of tribalism and fragmenting society. This has contributed to a form of multiculturalism that supports a vision of American society as divided into many competing groups with distinct identities and no common national identity.

The most fundamental problem with America's radical individualism is that it is based on a misguided concept of the self and freedom. It involves what Thomas Merton, the American Trappist monk, has called "the illusion of separateness." Everything that exists is both a unique individual and interconnected with the larger universe. People are born interconnected with families, local communities, spiritual traditions, nations, the larger human family, and the greater community of life on Earth. With these interconnections go ethical responsibilities without which human life and development are not possible. Moreover, the individual finds meaning and purpose and realizes true freedom through a sense of belonging, self-mastery, honesty, humility, trustworthiness, courage, caring, compassion, and service. It is love that makes us whole. Centuries ago Rabbi Hillel said it simply: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

V. Renewing and Reconstructing the Democratic Way of life

The ideal of building a cohesive, pluralistic society guided by reason and experience and inspired by a love of freedom coupled with a compassionate spirit of respect for the equal dignity of all persons is the meaning of spiritual democracy.¹⁸ A commitment to human rights, justice, and the common good flows from respect for the freedom and equality of the other. In the world's great spiritual traditions, spiritual development is centrally concerned with nurturing a sense of meaning and purpose and the spirit of understanding, compassion, and love. It is in this regard that one can talk about democracy as a spiritual practice. For many, spiritual democracy is a way of being and living together inspired by a religious faith but for others it springs from an open-hearted ethical humanism. Whatever its source, it is both a demanding and a rewarding spiritual and moral discipline that never forgets there is a tendency toward injustice as well as goodness in all of us. In these troubled times, those seeking the soul of America, the animating spirit of the nation, will find it here.

Paula Winkler, who promoted the role of women in Judaism, in a letter to her soulmate and future husband, Martin Buber, sharpens the focus on the spiritual dimension of respect for the dignity of the other that is at the heart of the democratic faith and spiritual democracy. She writes: "Our attitude toward each other ought above all to be person to person – not 'Frenchman to German,' not 'Jew to Christian,' and perhaps less of 'man to woman.'"¹⁹ Had Winkler been writing in America today, she might have added "black to white, Democrat to Republican, and established citizen to immigrant." One ideally encounters the other first and foremost simply as a fellow human being. As

Paula Winkler makes clear in her letter, embracing this attitude should not be confused with an attempt to deny the importance of difference and to blur the distinctions between cultures and religions. It is, however, a corrective to a one-sided emphasis on difference that generates separatism and fails to perceive what can bring people together in the midst of their diversity. It involves what Howard Thurman, the black spiritual leader and philosopher, describes as listening for “the sound of the genuine” in the other. It awakens compassion. It makes possible dialogue, forgiveness, and cooperation. The nation’s many social problems in the twenty-first century involving sexism, sexual abuse, racial discrimination, interreligious hatred, oppression of minorities, and economic inequality, as well as the contempt and hatred that pollute the nation’s politics, are rooted in a failure to respect the inherent dignity of the other.

In concluding it is important to ask: from the perspective of the twenty-first century, what fundamental ideals and values are missing in our federal and state constitutions? The science of ecology has made clear that human beings are an interdependent part of the greater community of life on Earth and that the degradation of the planet’s environment by human activity threatens to undermine the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for present and future generations. The Preamble to the Constitution does recognize that the American people have a basic responsibility to “secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” In this regard, it should be made explicit in the nation’s legal systems that future as well as present generations have a right to a clean and healthy environment. Were there to be a constitutional amendment on the environment, it should include a declaration affirming the interdependence of humanity and nature and the ethical imperative to respect and care for the greater community of life in all its diversity. The Earth Charter, a people’s treaty that is the product of a world wide, cross-cultural dialogue on shared values and the common good, provides a very good example of how democratic and ecological ideals can be integrated in a comprehensive ethical vision for building a better world.²⁰

The moral and spiritual transformation necessary for the renewal of our democracy will have to come from the bottom up beginning with families, educational institutions, religious organizations, local communities, and voluntary civic associations. Only pressure from the people will force the national political parties to find ways to work together intelligently and responsibly for the public welfare. A transformation at the local level in how people interact, deliberate, and build community is what is needed. It is the direct experience of a better way of life that will change people’s thinking, attitudes, and behavior. Such change can help to promote a national dialogue about the spiritual and moral values essential to the flourishing of a free society in an age of economic globalization and the internet. Hopefully it might lead to what Michael Sandel calls “a new politics of the common good” that generates “moral and spiritual aspiration,” healing and reconciliation, and a compelling vision of America’s national purpose.²¹

John Dewey argued that the most effective way to promote social reconstruction is to start with a transformation of the schools, and one promising development is the growing support for PreK-12 school reform movements that promote education of the whole child. These initiatives include social and emotional learning, character education,

education in compassion, training in mindfulness, and citizenship education. In addition, guided by new scientific research demonstrating the close correlation between the wellbeing of young people and their spiritual and moral development, a National Council on Spirituality in Education has been formed with strong support from educators.²² There are many schools that are already committed to education for the whole child and that promote the spiritual, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of development as well as social, emotional and academic learning. Some have a religious affiliation and some are secular. What is especially critical in this regard is the school culture. Renewing American democracy will require taking the spirit of holistic education and spiritual democracy into all the nation's schools.

How the founding of the nation and American history are taught is an especially critical issue if the American people are to recover a sense of shared national identity. Given the influence of identity politics, some want to tell the American story primarily from the perspective of marginalized and oppressed groups, emphasizing the grave injustices that have occurred and the moral failures of the nation's dominant white, male leadership. While the truth in this story needs to be honestly addressed, insofar as the objective of such a narrative is to condemn America and discredit her institutions, it contains no real answer to the problems that face oppressed groups, the nation, and the world. The alternative is to highlight what is truly enlightened, innovative, and good in the revolutionary founding of the nation and its history without denying the moral failures and injustice that are tragically very much a part of the story. If there is to be progressive change, hope is essential. The nation's founding ideals and the struggle to realize those ideals by women and men of courage and good will from all races, ethnic groups, and religions should be viewed as one major source of hope that can inspire oncoming generations.

In his inaugural address as president, John F. Kennedy invoked the spirit of the civic republicanism of the founders when he stated: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." One way to awaken a new sense of national identity, solidarity, and commitment to the common good among the American people is to require of all citizens, women and men, one or two years of national service after high school or college. The requirement could be fulfilled by serving in the military, teaching in the public schools, or through any number of other socially beneficial domestic or international projects.

In conclusion, if the American people are to come together to address the great social, economic, and environmental challenges they face in the twenty-first century, it will require deepening our understanding of how to live meaningfully, responsibly, and joyfully with freedom. In this regard, the upcoming 250th anniversary of the Revolution presents a unique opportunity to rediscover the common sense in the founders' republicanism and to commit ourselves to a fresh vision of the democratic faith infused with reverence for the mystery of being, a passion for what is right and just, and a new respect for Earth, our shared home in the universe.

¹ Jo Ann Boydston, ed., John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953, Vol. 9 (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 1-58. See also John Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" in LW 14:224-230.

² Federalist Paper 45. Robert Bellah, et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1985), 252-256.

³ As quoted in Gordon S. Wood, The Radicalism of the American Revolution (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992), 221.

⁴ Jill Lepore, These Truths: A History of the United States (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2018), 36-38, 123-128.

⁵ Sidney Alstrom, A Religious History of the American People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 124.

⁶ Philip Gorski, American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion From the Puritans to the Present (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), viii-ix, 14-23, 37-44, 88-92, 116-131, 148-157.

⁷ James Madison, Federalist Paper 39.

⁸ Wood, Radicalism, 95-109.

⁹ George Washington Farewell Address.

¹⁰ Ibid.; James Madison, Federalist Paper 47.

¹¹ Gorski, American Covenant, 23-26, 62,82, 223-225; Wood, Radicalism, 104.

¹² Wood, Radicalism, 232

¹³ Ibid., 234.

¹⁴ Ibid., 229-240.

¹⁵ Democracy and its Discontents: America in Search of A Public Philosophy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁶ See "A Call to Civil Society: Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths" issued by the Council on Civil Society, a joint project of the Institute for American Values and the University of Chicago Divinity School. The Council's report was issued in 1998, but the moral decline it describes has only worsened and its recommendations remain as relevant as when first released.

¹⁷ For an illuminating account of the origins and nature of radical individualism in America and the spiritual challenge it presents, see Robert Bellah, Habits of the Heart. See also David Brooks, The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life (New York: Random House, 2019), 3-11; Gorski, American Covenant, 28-30.

¹⁸ I was first introduced to the concept of “spiritual democracy” by Maurice Wohlgernter's Introduction to M. Wohlgernter, ed., History, Religion, and Spiritual Democracy: Essays in Honor of Joseph L. Blau (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), lxx-lxxiv.

¹⁹ Paul Mendes-Flohr, Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Doubt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 13.

²⁰ The Earth Charter has been endorsed by over 750 organizations in the United States and over seven thousand organizations worldwide. See www.earthcharter.org.

²¹ Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do? (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009), 261-269.

²² For information on the Collaborative for Spirituality in Education and the National Council, see www.spiritualityineducation.org.