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http://www.commonwealinstitute.org/CIBlog/2007/01/playing_with_a_progressive_narrative.html

Playing with a Progressive Narrative

I've been thinking about the power of narrative—a story that weaves together where we have been, where we want to go, and why we want to get there—and how one progressive narrative can be used to tie together progressive values, recent new research findings, opinion pieces from other sources, and an unrelated book about protecting the commons.

The progressive narrative of a society in which all can have opportunity and thrive serves as a vehicle for bringing together our values, our past, and our dreams for the future. Conscious use of this same narrative in multiple contexts will reinforce it in the public mind, increasing its power and making it more likely to become our reality.

[Bill Moyers' superb new article](#) in *The Nation* discusses the American story as inherently a liberal story. It is worth reading for every student, every aspiring politician, indeed, every citizen. Here are a few of the quotations from some of the other eloquent sources that Moyers includes:

From Paul Starr's forthcoming book, *Freedom's Power: The True Force of Liberalism*:

At the heart of our experience as a nation is the proposition that each one of us has a right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." As flawed in its reach as it was brilliant in its inspiration for times to come, that proposition carries an inherent imperative: "inasmuch as the members of a liberal society have a right to basic requirements of human development such as education and a minimum standard of security, they have obligations to each other, mutually and through their government, to ensure that conditions exist enabling every person to have the opportunity for success in life."

Moyers also quotes from John Schwarz, in *Freedom Reclaimed: Rediscovering the American Vision*:

The free-market view "cannot provide us with a philosophy we find compelling or meaningful," Schwarz writes. Nor does it assure the availability of economic opportunity "that is truly adequate to each individual and the status of full legal as well as political equality." [...G]overnment [...] "is not simply the way we express ourselves collectively but also often the only way we preserve our freedom from private power and its incursions." That is one reason the notion that every person has a right to meaningful opportunity "has assumed the position of a moral bottom line in the nation's popular culture ever since the beginning." Freedom, he says, is "considerably more than a private value." It is essentially a social idea, which explains why the worship of the free market "fails as a compelling idea in terms of the moral reasoning of freedom itself."

And then Moyers sums them up in a simple story line: "...the promise of America leaves no one out."

This progressive story line can be applied in other contexts.

Consider a recent research project on framing and language. Public Works, a center within [Demos](#), has been working with the [Frameworks Institute](#), [Cultural Logic](#), and other organizations on a major research project to understand how to think and talk more constructively about government. Their [initial findings](#) were that Americans superficially think about government negatively, either in terms of corrupt politicians or massive bureaucracy. However, in pursuing a deeper understanding of the constructive roles of government, the researchers recognized the positive resonance of a concept they refer to as [Public Structures](#). These are

[...] Critical systems and objects that government creates and maintains including both physical infrastructure and also organizational systems such as courts, schools, regulatory systems, etc. [and the] important benefits that flow to citizens and society, including greater prosperity, security, stability, efficiency, and so forth" because of these Public Structures.

In their research, the Public Structures frame was easily understood and appreciated by average Americans, who responded favorably to the idea that creation and maintenance of Public Structure is an important and desirable function of government.

Unrelated to this research, there have been a number of articles recently about sustainable cities, healthy communities, green buildings, livable neighborhoods, and new job creation. These can all be tied in to the Public Structures concept. Governments are intrinsically involved in the zoning, permitting, and in some cases financing and design, of these more livable and environmentally sustainable human environments. The actually building of the structures and the operation of the businesses that provide the new jobs may be done by private individuals and corporations, but the framework and the support systems are a result of the actions government, working for the people.

Then juxtapose these thoughts with businessman Peter Barnes' book, [Capitalism 3.0](#). Barnes (a founder of Working Assets) argues that the Commons--those things such as air, water, culture, language--from which we all benefit, but which we often fail to recognize or appreciate, are not adequately protected by either corporations or government. He proposes that new property rights, birthrights, and institutions be created to enlarge the commons sector, give it greater recognition, and protect it for future generations. The commons trusts Barnes proposes could even be empowered to act on behalf of nonhuman species, which otherwise have no voice.

What we see here is that the commons, like Public Structures, can benefit the people, can enable them to have opportunities to make the best of their lives and be fulfilled. Indeed, Public Structures are part of the commons from which all in society can benefit. And the obligation to protect the commons, from which all benefit, relates back to the [fundamental progressive values](#) of empathy, responsibility, and community.

Tying all these threads together, the progressive narrative, which is based on the values of empathy, responsibility, and community, brings together

- the creation and maintenance of Public Structures, which are common assets in which all can share;
- proposals to restore our Public Structures and create new ones; and
- the recognition of our responsibility to protect the commons as our birthright and that of future generations.

By invoking the progressive narrative of a society in which all can have opportunity and thrive, we can reinforce the underlying values and improve the chances that this vision will be realized.

Posted by Dr. Katherine Forrest on January 9, 2007 10:46 PM | [Permalink](#)