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Introduction

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I?

—RABBI HILLEL

We can never predict the impact of our actions. When she was two months pregnant, Rebecca Hughes worried about how she'd find time to continue her work as a freelance science and health writer, and also be a good mother to her first child. On the spur of the moment, she approached a woman in the elevator of their large Boston apartment building. The other woman was about eight months pregnant. Although they'd never spoken, Rebecca introduced herself and blurted, "I see you're pregnant. I am, too. What if we exchanged baby-sitting?" Scrawling her phone number on a scrap of paper, she placed it in the other woman's hand.

The woman looked alarmed, but took the note and hurried off the elevator. Rebecca felt embarrassed, but a week later the woman called her. "I've been thinking about it," she said. "Would you like to start exchanging even before your baby is born?" Rebecca accepted the offer. She and her new friend invited several others they'd met in the neighborhood to participate, including a nun who took care of the baby of a single surgical intern. The group soon became a close-knit extended family, baby-sitting each other's children daily, holding a weekly play group, sharing emotional support, volunteering together at a local community help line, and exchanging tips on raising children, staying healthy, and managing crowded lives.

In time, twenty families were involved, and the co-op had become permanently woven into the fabric of their neighborhood. "It just seems like a more hopeful way to live," Rebecca recalls

years later, after she and I met—and eventually married. “Finding group solutions to individual problems, I felt a lot less alone.”

In both intent and outcome, Rebecca’s effort was modest. It resolved an everyday personal dilemma, while helping nurture an old-fashioned sense of community in an urban setting. Yet it also had a powerful emotional and spiritual impact on her life. It helped replace isolation with connection.

We can take the lesson of Rebecca’s story—that our problems can often best be solved through common effort—and apply it on a larger stage as well, addressing the major issues of our time. When we open ourselves up to those around us, asking for and offering help and support, we discover strengths and passions we never knew we had. We begin to reconnect with our fellow human beings, with our wisest and most humane instincts, and with the core of who we are, which we call our soul.

A MORE HOPEFUL WAY TO LIVE

In the personal realm, most Americans are thoughtful, caring, generous. We try to do our best by family and friends. At times we’ll even stop to help another driver stranded with a roadside breakdown, or give some spare change to a stranger. But increasingly, a wall now separates each of us from the world outside, and from others who’ve likewise taken refuge in their own private sanctuaries. We’ve all but forgotten that public participation is the very soul of democratic citizenship, and how much it can enrich our lives.

However, the reason for our wholesale retreat from social involvement is not, I believe, that most of us feel all is well with the world. I live in Seattle, a city with a seemingly unstoppable economy. Yet every time I go downtown I see men and women with signs saying “I’ll work for food,” or “Homeless vet. Please help.” Their suffering diminishes me as a human being. I also travel extensively, doing research and giving lectures throughout the coun-

try. Except in the wealthiest of enclaves, people everywhere say, "Things are hard here." America's economic boom has passed many of us by. We struggle to live on meager paychecks. We worry about layoffs, random violence, the rising cost of health care, and the miseducation of our kids. Too stretched to save, uncertain about Social Security, many of us wonder just how we'll survive when we get old. We feel overwhelmed, we say, and helpless to change things.

Even those of us who are economically comfortable seem stressed. We spend hours commuting on crowded freeways, and hours more at jobs whose demands never end. We complain that we don't have enough time left for families and friends. We worry about the kind of world we'll pass on to our grandchildren. Then we also shrug and say there's nothing we can do.

To be sure, the issues we now face are complex—perhaps more so than in the past. How can we comprehend the moral implications of a world in which Nike pays Michael Jordan more to appear in its ads than it pays all the workers at its Indonesian shoe factories combined? Today the five hundred richest people on the planet control more wealth than the bottom three billion, half of the human population. Is it possible even to grasp the process that led to this most extraordinary imbalance? More important, how do we even begin to redress it?

Yet what leaves too many of us sitting on the sidelines is not only a lack of understanding of the complexities of our world. It's not only an absence of readily apparent ways to begin or resume public involvement. Certainly we need to decide for ourselves whether particular causes are wise or foolish—be they the politics of campaign finance reform, attempts to address the growing gap between rich and poor, or efforts to safeguard water, air, and wilderness. We need to identify and connect with worthy groups that take on these issues, whether locally or globally. But first we need to believe that our individual involvement is worthwhile, that what we might do in the public sphere will not be in vain.

This means we face a challenge that is as much psychological

as political. As the Ethiopian proverb says, "He who conceals his disease cannot be cured." We need to understand our cultural diseases of callousness, shortsightedness, and denial, and learn what it will take to heal our society and heal our souls. How did so many of us become convinced that we can do nothing to affect our common future? And how have some other Americans managed to remove the cataracts from their vision and work powerfully for change?

When we do take a stand, we grow psychologically and spiritually. Pete Knutson is one of my oldest friends. During his twenty-five years as a commercial fisherman in Washington and Alaska, he's been forced, time and again, to respond to the steady degradation of salmon spawning grounds. "You'd have a hard time spawning, too, if you had a bulldozer in your bedroom," he says, explaining the destruction of once-rich salmon habitat by commercial development and timber industry clear-cutting. Pete could have simply accepted this degradation as fate, focusing on getting a maximum share of the dwindling fish populations. Instead, he's gradually built an alliance between Washington State fishermen, environmentalists, and Native American tribes, persuading them to work collectively to demand that the habitat be preserved and restored.

The cooperation Pete created didn't come easy: Washington's fishermen were historically individualistic and politically mistrustful, more inclined, in Pete's judgment, "to grumble or blame the Indians than to act." Now, with their new allies, they began to push for cleaner spawning streams, preservation of the Endangered Species Act, and an increased flow of water over major regional dams to help boost salmon runs. But large industrial interests, such as the aluminum companies, feared that these measures would raise their electricity costs or restrict their opportunities for development. So a few years ago they bankrolled a statewide initiative to regulate fishing nets in a way that would eliminate small family fishing operations.

"I think we may be toast," said Pete, when Initiative 640 first

surfaced. In an Orwellian twist, its backers even presented the initiative as environmentally friendly, to mislead casual voters. It was called "Save Our Sealife," although fishermen soon rechristened it "Save Our Smelters." At first, those opposing 640 thought they had no chance of success: They were outspent, outstaffed, outgunned. Similar initiatives had already passed in Florida, Louisiana, and Texas, backed by similar industrial interests. I remember Pete sitting in a Seattle tavern with two fisherman friends, laughing bitterly and saying, "The three of us are going to take on the aluminum companies? We're going to beat Reynolds and Kaiser?"

But they refused to give up. Instead, Pete and his coworkers systematically enlisted the region's major environmental groups to campaign against the initiative. They worked with the media to explain the larger issues at stake. And they focused public attention on the measure's powerful financial backers, and their interest in its outcome. On election night, November 1995, Initiative 640 was defeated throughout the state. White fishermen, Native American activists, and Friends of the Earth staffers threw their arms around each other in victory. "I'm really proud of you, Dad," Pete's twelve-year-old son kept repeating. Pete was stunned.

"Everyone felt it was hopeless," Pete said, looking back. "But if we were going to lose, I wanted at least to put up a good fight. And we won because of all the earlier work we'd done, year after year, to build up our environmental relationships, get some credibility, and show that we weren't just in it for ourselves."

We often think of social involvement as noble but impractical. Yet as Pete's story attests, it can serve enlightened self-interest and the interests of others simultaneously, while giving us a sense of connection and purpose nearly impossible to find in purely private life. "It takes energy to act," said Pete. "But it's more draining to bury your anger, convince yourself you're powerless, and swallow whatever's handed to you. The times I've compromised my integrity and accepted something I shouldn't, the ghosts of my choices have haunted me. When you get involved in something meaningful, you make your life count. What you do makes a difference. It

blows my mind that we beat 640 starting out with just a small group of people who felt it was wrong to tell lies.”

In fighting to save the environment and his economic livelihood, Pete strengthened his own soul. How the rest of us might achieve something similar is not always clear. We often don't know where to start. Most of us would like to see people treated more justly, to have the earth accorded the respect it deserves, and to feel less pressure in our lives. But we find it hard to imagine having much of a role in this process. We mistrust our own ability to make a difference. The magnitude of the issues at hand, coupled with this sense of powerlessness, has led far too many of us to conclude that social involvement isn't worth the cost.

Such resignation isn't an innate response, or the creation of some inevitable fate. Rather, it's what psychologists call learned helplessness. Society has systematically taught us to ignore the ills we see, and leave them to others to handle. Understandably, we find it unsettling even to think about crises as huge and profound in their implications as the extinction of species, depletion of the ozone layer, and destruction of the rainforests. Or the desperate poverty that blights entire neighborhoods in our nation's largest cities. We're led to believe that if we can't solve every one of these kinds of problems, we shouldn't bother to become socially active at all. We're also taught to doubt our voice—to feel we lack either the time to properly learn and articulate the issues we care about, or the standing to speak out and be heard. To get socially involved, we believe, requires almost saintlike judgment, confidence, and character—a standard we can never meet. Whatever impulses toward involvement we might have, they're dampened by a culture that demeans idealism, enshrines cynicism, and makes us feel naive for caring about our fellow human beings or the planet we inhabit.

THE DREAM OF PRIVATE SANCTUARY

When I came of age, during the Vietnam War, peace and justice activists worked tremendously hard to convince their fellow citi-

zens that our leaders were lying. Back then, most of us grew up believing our government. It took massive betrayals of trust, and much patient work, before large numbers of Americans decided that this confidence was often unwarranted, and that they needed to challenge official policies. After Vietnam, Watergate, and a parade of other government abuses and scandals, however, people began assuming that all politicians lie; indeed, in this cynical era, lying is considered their defining characteristic. And we consider it normal for wealthy interests to buy and sell our elected officials like so many trading cards. But as singer Bruce Cockburn says, "The trouble with normal is it always gets worse." By allowing others to set the standards that debase the public realm, we risk passing on a world that's meaner, more polarized, more desperate, and unquestionably more corrupt. Working to change things doesn't guarantee that our lives or our society will improve. But hopelessness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the chapters to follow, I'm going to try to convince you that our most serious problems, both the public ones and those that seem most personal, are in large part common problems, which can be solved only through common efforts. The dream of private sanctuary is an illusion. It erodes our souls by eroding our sense of larger connection, whether to our fellow human beings or to that force many of us call God. The walls we're building around ourselves, around those closest to us, and ultimately around our hearts may provide a temporary feeling of security. But they can't prevent the world from affecting us. Quite the opposite. The more we construct such barriers, the more private life, for most of us, will grow steadily more insecure.

Think about why we spend more and more time at work, and why most families need two incomes to get by. There are various reasons, of course, but none more relevant than the fact that average wages buy less than they did in the early 1970s. Would such pressures be as acute if we hadn't enshrined "Greed is good" as a core cultural ethic, justifying all manner of destructive economic and political decisions? We worry much about paying the bills when we

or our children get sick. We wouldn't if the United States joined every other advanced industrial nation in providing universal health care coverage. If public support for our schools were adequate, and we didn't pay our teachers less than in all comparable nations, we wouldn't have to devote so much time and energy to making sure our kids get a decent education. We used to hope for solid pensions funded by our employers. Now we rely on anything-but-solid IRAs, Keoghs, and 401(k)s, and spend hours trying to figure out how to make the right gambles in a casino economy, so our investments will increase enough to support us in our old age. Surely, as Rebecca says, there's a more hopeful way to live.

AN ANTIDOTE TO POWERLESSNESS

I've written *Soul of a Citizen* because I'm certain this more hopeful way is possible. I'm certain because I've witnessed it—again and again, under every imaginable set of circumstances, and among people as diverse as America itself. For much of the past thirty years, I've watched ordinary citizens get involved, find their voice, take a stand. I've seen them embark on that passage from a purely private life, in which we leave the destiny of our communities to others, to one that joins private and public. I've also explored why so many other people, including once passionately involved individuals, find it hard to act on their beliefs—why they get caught in doubt and hesitation or burn out in despair.

My experience leads me to believe that the main distinction between those who participate fully in their communities and those who withdraw into private life doesn't rest in the active citizens' grasp of complex issues, or their innate moral strength. Instead, those who get involved view their place in the world very differently. They have learned specific lessons about approaching social change: that they don't need to wait for the perfect circumstances, the perfect cause, or the perfect level of knowledge to take a stand; that they can proceed step by step, so that they don't get over-

Chapter One

Making Our Lives Count

Souls are like athletes that need opponents worthy of them if they are to be tried and extended and pushed to the full use of their powers.

—THOMAS MERTON

We're often taught to view social involvement as a zero-sum game. With all our life pressures and the stress that comes with them, we barely have time for family and friends. How could we possibly take on some demanding cause?

Yet for all the frustration we expect, when we do get involved, we get a lot back: new relationships, fresh skills, a sense of empowerment, pride in accomplishment. "A rich life," writes philosopher and theologian Cornel West, is fundamentally a life of serving others, "trying to leave the world a little better than you found it. . . . This is true at the personal level. . . . [but there's also] a political version of this. It has to do with what you see when you get up in the morning and look in the mirror and ask yourself whether you are simply wasting time on the planet or spending time in an enriching manner."

Again and again, I've heard active citizens say that what motivates them the most is the desire to respect what they see in the mirror. The exercise isn't about vanity, but about values, about taking stock of ourselves and comparing the convictions we say we hold with the lives we actually lead. It's about seeing ourselves from the viewpoint of our communities, the earth, maybe even God. If eyes are windows to the soul, and faces reflections of character, looking in the mirror lets us step back from the flux of our lives and hold ourselves accountable.

Sound a bit daunting? It can be. As the saying goes, not one among us is without fault. But such self-examination also can be

enormously rewarding. For it's equally true that not one among us lacks a heart, which is the wellspring of courage (the word is derived from *coeur*, French for heart). At the core of our being lie resources many of us never dream we possess, much less imagine we can draw upon.

"I NEVER KNEW I HAD IT"

Virginia Ramirez, of San Antonio, Texas, could easily have lived out her days without ever discovering her hidden inner strength. She left school after eighth grade to get married. "That was what most Hispanic women in my generation did. My husband went to work after sixth grade." Although dropping out seemed normal at the time, she felt frustrated when she couldn't help her children with their homework, and dreamed of resuming her education someday. Virginia wasn't completely detached from her community: She was active in the PTA, "not running the meetings, but making the cookies and punch, carrying out the tasks." She'd baby-sit for her neighbors, help in whatever ways she could, "doing basic community work without realizing it." Mostly, though, she focused on private life, raising her five children while her husband worked for a taxi company.

When Virginia was forty-five, she realized that an elderly neighbor was getting sick every winter. The neighbor was a widow who lived in a house so dilapidated that it couldn't retain heat. "She was one of those people who always paid her taxes on time, always faithfully making out her little money orders. But she couldn't afford to repair her house, and everyone around here was just as poor. So I went with her to city agencies trying to get help. They kept sending us from place to place, from department to department. Finally she died of pneumonia. The paramedics said she'd never have died if her house hadn't been so freezing cold.

"I was very angry," Virginia recalls. "I'd never been so angry in my life. This woman had done everything she was supposed to,

and now she was dead because no one could help her fix her house. Someone said there's this community organization called COPS, and maybe they could help. I'd heard of them before, but thought they were too radical, a bunch of nuts."

At that time, in the early 1980s, the largely volunteer-based COPS (Communities Organized for Public Service) had been around for eight years. Growing out of a network established by the late Saul Alinsky, the godfather of modern community organizing, COPS began by working through churches to organize San Antonio's desperately poor Latino population. The group successfully pushed for municipal investments in storm sewers, parks, and schools in the town's long-neglected barrios, and got major downtown businesses to hire their residents. COPS eventually secured over a billion dollars of public and private resources for their community through a combination of grassroots organizing and innovative protests. During one series of protests, lines of COPS members endlessly exchanged pennies to tie up traffic at local banks, and sympathetic nuns tried on bridal gowns at local department stores to put pressure on their staff. But Virginia had paid them little heed.

So it was with some hesitation that she attended a COPS meeting at her church, Immaculate Conception, where she raised her hand and said, "I have this problem: This neighbor lady of mine died because it was cold and they wouldn't fix her house. I want someone to do something about it."

"What are *you* going to do about it?" the COPS organizer asked. But Virginia didn't know what to do. That was why she'd come to the meeting in the first place. "I thought you people were supposed to be able to help," she said, and walked out of the meeting in anger.

A few days later, a COPS organizer knocked on Virginia's door. She was a nun, which was the only reason Virginia let her in. "All I want to know is why you were so angry," asked the nun. Virginia was angry, she said, because she'd tried to help the old lady and failed. But that wasn't all. She also was upset because her kids

weren't getting properly educated in school. Because she'd given up on her own education and dreams. Because she'd had to watch her father, whom she'd adored, be humiliated again and again by police and store owners when they drove from state to state to pick crops. She was upset because no one seemed to care about her community.

The nun didn't advise Virginia to do anything in particular. She just asked if they could talk again. When she returned she suggested Virginia hold a house meeting, to see if her neighbors had concerns as well.

Nine people came. Virginia had never conducted a meeting. Her stomach felt hollow and clenched. Her legs shook so much she almost fell over. But gradually people began to talk of their problems and experiences. Their neighborhood had been thrown together at the cheapest possible cost, built for workers at the nearby slaughterhouses, which were now closed down. It lacked sidewalks and adequate sewers. Most of the houses were crumbling. As she listened, Virginia realized that more was at stake than the sad death of a lonely widow; this was about the future of her community.

Convinced that the neighborhood hadn't received its share of public funds, Virginia and other COPS members painstakingly researched documents at city hall. And they were right: The city had built a street in a more affluent area with money actually earmarked to repair homes in their barrio. The next step—testifying before the city council—took even more courage. When Virginia walked to the podium to protest the diversion of funds, she was so nervous she forgot what she was going to say. "I didn't remember my speech. I barely remembered my name. Then I turned around, saw the sixty people who'd come with me, and realized I was just telling the story of our community. So I told it and we got our money back.

"It was hard to stand up to politicians and tell them what we wanted, because it's been imbedded in my mind to be nice to everybody. It seemed rude at first. But I began to understand the importance of holding people accountable for what they promise."

As they did with other newly energized community members, COPS trainers encouraged Virginia to continue learning, so as to make her involvement in social causes more effective. They helped her to reflect on each step she took in every campaign, and to acquire the skills to research, negotiate, articulate a point of view, analyze people's needs, and channel her anger. They also introduced Virginia to a new community of people who were similarly involved. One of these new colleagues, a sixty-eight-year-old widow, became her inspiration. "Even though she didn't know English and couldn't read or write," Virginia recalls, "she spoke out and stood up for her beliefs. She talked to other families. And she keep telling me, 'Go back to school.' She always said, 'You have to represent us.'"

Even with this support and inspiration, Virginia's journey into public life wasn't easy. She often prayed over whether her new-found path was right, asking God for guidance, "like what am I doing with these crazy people and where is it going to lead." Yet her involvement also strengthened her faith, giving new meaning to biblical lessons that had once seemed more remote and abstract. "Suddenly you read these stories about injustice from thousands of years ago," Virginia says, "and it seems like they're talking about today. You feel like you have a chance to be one of God's instruments, to do His work by helping your community. You feel closer to Him in the process."

Yet Virginia's choices still raised difficult tensions, particularly in her family. At first her husband was critical of her involvement, saying "That's not your role" and telling her she was neglecting her household. "My kids were mostly grown, but Hispanic women weren't supposed to do these things. It was hard for him to understand that I was becoming a totally different person—going out of the house, going to meetings, wanting to talk about the things I was doing. Then my mother would call every day and say, 'This is not for you. What are you doing to your family?' It was like twenty-four-hour guilt. You're torn between your home and your

desire to grow as a person. For a while I thought my family was going to break up."

Eventually, Virginia returned to school and acquired her GED. Then she enrolled at a community college. Studying for a college test—her first test in over forty years—Virginia was sitting with books spread across the kitchen table, and no supper ready, when her husband came home. He ran his finger over the furniture to show her the accumulated dust. "Look at this house!" he yelled. "It's going to ruin. You're not taking care of anything."

"I'm preparing my future," she responded, her voice trembling. "If you don't like it, that's too bad, because I'm going to do it."

She'd never talked to him that way, and he was shocked. "I'm sorry," Virginia said, "but this is a priority." It took her husband a long time to get used to her new attitude and concerns, "to realize," as Virginia says, "that I was going to keep on going to school and to my meetings." But he slowly accepted Virginia's transformation and even took pride in it. "I'd begun to think of myself as a person. I'm Virginia Ramirez, not just someone's wife, mother, or daughter. My husband realized I was getting involved for both of us."

College gave Virginia the credentials to secure a new job, training and supervising over three hundred volunteers who do health education outreach in low-income neighborhoods. During her fifteen years with COPS, she's moved up in the organization, first training people in her parish, then working with other local churches to develop their members' leadership skills as well. She's focused particularly on women like herself—working to inspire them, as others had spurred her to action. Using her own unexpected journey as an example, she's taught them to find their own voice and speak out for their communities, despite any doubts or hesitations they might have, and even over the initial resistance of their husbands. "At first all the men in the neighborhood said they had a lot of respect for me, but just don't get my wife involved. After a while they began to come around."

Virginia's also negotiated with the mayor and bank presidents on major community development projects, pressured local corporations for decent jobs, pulled together after-school literacy projects. "You should see our neighborhood now," she says. "It's just so pretty."

She realized how far she'd come when she went to Washington, D.C., to testify before the U.S. Senate on an innovative job-training program that she and other COPS members had helped develop. "I stood there getting an award from Clinton and Gore," she recalls. "I thought about how you can't do anything by yourself, but with other people you can change things. I also thought about how this process has changed me, developed potential I'd never have dreamed of. Fourteen years ago I was a stay-at-home mother. That was my world. Never in my wildest imagination could I have thought that I'd be here. Now I tell people I learned all my talents and confidence at the University of COPS. The people there found some spark in me. I never knew I had it."

Entire communities can similarly grow when challenged. When Cherokee leader Wilma Mankiller visited the impoverished three-hundred-family town of Bell, Oklahoma, she asked the residents what would most help improve things. She expected them to suggest projects that addressed alcoholism, unemployment, or kids dropping out of school. Instead people wanted something simpler, something most of us take for granted: a clean water supply connected to every house, so their kids wouldn't have to bathe in polluted streams or drink from a single spigot at the schoolhouse. Mankiller responded by challenging each family to lay a mile of pipe and also help with fund-raising and other tasks. Soon families were racing to complete their sections the fastest. Inspired by its own success, the formerly passive and demoralized community tackled other projects, such as building better housing and making an organized effort to preserve the Cherokee language and culture. The town became a model of hope. Just as COPS had called forth the "spark" of strength and vision in Virginia Ramirez, so

Mankiller helped revive the collective spirit of Bell. She went on to be elected chief of the Cherokee nation.

STRETCHING THE SOUL

"Heart," "spark," "spirit"—whatever word we use for the mysterious force that animates us, its full potential cannot be realized in isolation. Indeed, according to developmental psychologists, individual growth is possible only through interaction with the human and natural world, and through experiences that challenge us. "Souls are like athletes," wrote the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, "that need opponents worthy of them if they are to be tried and extended and pushed to the full use of their powers."

Many of us may already know the value of stretching our souls in personal life. We know the virtue of learning to voice our needs, fight for our choices, recover from psychological intimidation. This process may require acknowledging painful truths, withstanding conflict, standing firm on what seems like shaky ground. We may need to question familiar habits, overcome self-doubt, and begin to separate who we really are from the roles we've been taught. Jungian analysts like James Hillman would say that by taking these steps we reconnect with what the Greeks called the *daimon*, the "acorn" of character at the core of our being. The psychiatrist M. Scott Peck describes spiritual healing as "an ongoing process of becoming increasingly conscious."

We are slower to attempt such transformations in the public sphere. Self-assertion there requires us not only to modify our outlook and behavior but also to confront a bewildering and often disorienting maze of institutions and individuals, powers and principalities. So we stay silent in the face of actions we know are unwise or morally troubling. We keep our opinions to ourselves, because we doubt our voices will be heard, mistrust our right to speak, or fear the consequences if we do speak out. We feel we

lack essential political skills. Like Virginia before she attended her first COPS meeting, we simply do not know we have it in us.

Yet coming out of one's cocoon in the public sphere is just as necessary to self-realization as it is in the private. I once told a young Puerto Rican activist about the notion, common among many of his fellow students, that they'd lose their identity by getting involved—find themselves “swallowed up” by the movements they joined. He laughed and said the reverse was true. “You learn things you never knew about yourself. You get pushed to your limits. You meet people who make you think and push you further. You don't lose your identity. You begin to find out who you really are. I feel sad for people who will never have this experience.”

You begin to find out who you really are. The implication is clear enough: We become human only in the company of other human beings. And this involves both opening our hearts and giving voice to our deepest convictions. The biblical vision of *shalom* describes this process with its concept of “right relationships” with our fellow humans, and with all of God's creation. The turning point for the Buddha, writes James Hillman, came only “when he left his protected palace gardens to enter the street. There the sick, the dead, the poor, and the old drew his soul down into the question of how to live life in the world.” As Hillman stresses, the Buddha became who he was precisely by leaving the cloistered life. A doctor I know works in a low-income clinic because, she says, “seeing the struggles of others helps me be true to myself. It helps me find out how people in very different circumstances live out their humanity.” Community involvement, in other words, is the mirror that best reflects our individual choices, our strengths and weaknesses, our accomplishments and failures. It allows our lives to count for something.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

America's prevailing culture of cynicism insists that nothing we do can matter. It teaches us not to get involved in shaping the world we'll pass on to our children. It encourages us to leave such important decisions to others—whether they be corporate and government leaders, or social activists whose lifestyles seem impossibly selfless or foreign. Sadly, and ironically, in a country born of a democratic political revolution, to be American today is to be apolitical. Civic withdrawal has become our norm. To challenge this requires courage. It also requires creating a renewed definition of ourselves as citizens—something closer to the nation of active stakeholders that leaders like Thomas Jefferson had in mind.

The importance of citizens' direct participation in a democracy was expressed thousands of years ago, by the ancient Greeks. In fact, they used the word "idiot" for people incapable of involving themselves in civic life. Now, the very word "political" has become so debased in our culture that we use it to describe either trivial office power plays or the inherently corrupt world of elected leaders. We've lost sight of its original roots in the Greek notion of the polis: the democratic sphere in which citizens, acting in concert, determine the character and direction of their society. "All persons alike," wrote Aristotle, should share "in the government to the utmost."

Reclaiming this political voice requires more than just identifying problems, which itself can feed our sense of overload. I think of an Arthur Miller play, *Broken Glass*, whose heroine obsesses over Hitler. From the untroubled environs of Brooklyn, she reads newspaper articles about *Kristallnacht*: synagogues smashed and looted; old men forced to scrub streets with toothbrushes while storm troopers laugh at them; and finally, children shipped off to the camps in cattle cars. Her concern contrasts with the approach of her family and friends, who insist, despite the mounting evidence, that such horrors are exaggerated. Yet she does nothing to address the situation publicly, except to grow more anxious. Eventually she becomes psychosomatically paralyzed.

The approach Miller's protagonist takes toward the horrors of Nazism resembles the condition psychologist Martin Seligman calls learned helplessness. People who suffer from severe depression, he found, do so less as a result of particular unpleasant experiences than because of their "explanatory style"—the story they tell themselves about how the world works. Depressed people have become convinced that the causes of their difficulties are permanent and pervasive, inextricably linked to their personal failings. There's nothing to be done because nothing can be done. This master narrative of their lives excuses inaction; it provides a rationale for remaining helpless. In contrast, individuals who function with high

effectiveness tend to believe that the problems they face result from factors that are specific and temporary, and therefore changeable. The story they live by empowers them.

This is not to say that change is easy, nor that everyone is in an equal position to bring it about. Some individuals and groups in America possess far more material and organizational resources than others. This reflects our deep social and economic inequities. But as social theorist and *Tikkun* magazine founder Michael Lerner has observed, we often fail to use the resources we do have, which may be of a different kind. "Most of us," Lerner says, "have been subjected to a set of experiences in our childhood and adult lives that makes us feel that we do not deserve to have power." Consequently, we can't imagine changing the direction of our society. We decide that things are worse than they actually are—a condition Lerner refers to as "surplus powerlessness." Think again of Virginia Ramirez's accomplishments, when she joined forces with other once-powerless people in fighting for their community.

The illusion of powerlessness can just as easily afflict the fortunate among us. I know many people who are confident and successful in their work and have loving personal relationships, yet can hardly conceive of trying to work toward a more humane society. Materially comfortable and professionally accomplished, they could make important social contributions. Instead they restrict their search for meaning and integrity to their personal lives. Their sense of shared fate extends only to their immediate families and friends. Despite their many advantages, they, too, have been taught an "explanatory style" that precludes participation in public life, except to promote the most narrow self-interest.

Whatever our situations, we all face a choice. We can ignore the problems that lie just beyond our front doors; we can allow decisions to be made in our name that lead to a meaner and more desperate world. We can yell at the TV newscasters and complain about how bad things are, using our bitterness as a hedge against involvement. Or we can work, as well as we can, to shape a more generous common future.