

Essential Knowledge for Holding the Office of Citizen in a Democratic Republic



by
Michael Hartoonian

*Knowledge will forever govern ignorance;
and a people who mean to be their own governors
must arm themselves with the power
which knowledge gives.
- James Madison, 1822*

The essential knowledge for citizenship in a republic like ours can be best understood within the concepts of: virtue, learning, (civic) work, and the symbiotic relationship between private and common wealth. If we can understand and act on these ideas, we have a chance of sustainability and growth. Without this knowledge a free nation will not long endure.

Virtue, learning, civic work, and the enhancement of both common and private wealth define the purpose for our schools. While these concepts are discussed in a way that might suggest a separate nature to each, it is the case that each one needs the attributes of the others. That is, these qualities are interrelated and depend upon each other for meaning. Virtue has much to do with learning, wealth, and work; as learning, in essence, is work, wealth, and virtue; and, work, of course, at least good work, is a function of learning, virtue, and wealth.

Investigation:

1. What is true wealth? How is it created? Is it defined differently at different times in a person's or nation's life?
2. What does learning have to do with truth? How is learning corrupted?
3. What differences, if any, exist between work and civic work?

Virtue

Where there is no virtue, the people perish.
- Semitic Proverb

We all know the Biblical (King James) proverb, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." In the Semitic language, the original word was "virtue": *where there is no virtue, the people will perish*. The translation into Greek turned "virtue" into "vision" because in the Greek language of the time, the two words had similar meaning. It is virtue, however, that needs our attention, because it is within virtue's context that we truly begin to see. The application of virtue to our learning communities may be a necessary condition for our survival as a democratic society. It is through understanding virtue as reciprocal duty to each other to the cultural heritage, and to the environment that we came to know and practice the inherent power of knowledge as the keys to life, liberty, and (public) happiness.

The notion of "the people" as a reservoir of virtue, as opposed to virtue being vested in a monarch or the aristocracy, is a radical political concept. Yet at our nation's birth it was an idea supported in the writings of men as politically different as Hamilton in *The Federalist Papers* and Jefferson in the *Declaration of Independence*. Using the writings of Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, and even Machiavelli, the writers of our constitution constructed an experiment to see whether or not people were capable of establishing and running a good government. The American republic thus mani-

festes a radical change in traditional ideas about good government, human character, and civic virtue. Primacy was placed upon the importance of the individual, so that the source of virtue was in the American *citizenry* - all of them. It was this reservoir of virtue that would guide people to build the good society.

It should be made clear that property, prosperity, and the work attitudes needed to succeed in the economic world were seen as part of the American system of virtue. American virtue expresses itself in an "adventurous entrepreneurship" that distinguishes our commercial character. On the other hand, it should also be emphasized that "happiness" as used in the Declaration of Independence was perceived as *public* happiness, that is, the ability and willingness to participate in the public life of the community and create common wealth. This was much more than economic participation. This source of happiness was defined as giving of one's work and one's resources for the betterment of the community. This was the seedbed of democratic capitalism.

The founding generation addressed the question of securing life, liberty, and public happiness in two ways. First of all, they developed a system of checks and balances to place one person's ambition against another's. As it was put in *The Federalist Papers*, "What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? This policy of supplying by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives, might be traced through the whole system of human affairs" (Fairfield, 1981, p.87).

Second, they addressed the condition of securing individual rights through education. In fact, the founders were extremely uneasy about the feebleness of civic education in the new order. Jefferson, particularly, argued long and eloquently that education for citizenship was the first responsibility of the republic and particularly of the states. To this end, he effectively proposed educational reforms for the State of Virginia as well as for the whole republic. Washington wanted a national university for the training of political leaders, and even the Bill of Rights, appended to the U.S. Constitution, was viewed as a way for future generations to educate citizens into civic responsibility (virtue). Not only would the tenth amendment give states the responsibility for education, but the Bill of Rights itself was seen as a curriculum that

the citizen could study, reflect upon, and use as a passageway to civic participation. The citizen, through education, would go beyond self-serving private action and protection, to manifest public or civic virtue, which, in reality, is the only true protection for private liberty.

Together, then, the dual concepts of (public) education and checks on ambition were to serve the republic in the development of civic conscientiousness (virtue), that is, a self-critical, self-righting ability coupled with an enlightened sense of statehood or enlightened nationalism. The premise upon which our republic is built, then, is the belief that virtue, law (rules), and education work together as a total system. It is within this context that the centrality of virtue and meaning to education, helps develop the good citizen, who does civic work, which defines the good community, which provides for education (Hartoonian, 1991).

Investigation:

1. Is it possible to have quality education programs in a community that does not respect scholarship? Teacher? Does it really matter what else you do to enhance learning if these two conditions are not present?
2. Within a democratic/capitalist republic, children have no right to read, or right to know their history, or economics, or biology, or any of the important elements of their cultural heritage. Indeed, students have a duty to know these things, and to study and act on the issues of the day. This is a truism in a democratic republic. Why, then, do we continue to corrupt our children by suggesting that the teachers are there to serve the needs of students and continue to conceptualize our schools as glorified vocational sequences, the purpose being to move children through as quickly as possible so they might ... get a job?
3. What does it mean to place virtue at the center of school programs? In that case, what would the school look like?

Learning

*Every person takes the limits of his or her field
or vision for the limits of the world.*

- Arthur Schopenhauer
1788-1860

Whatever else learning is, it is first of all, a habit of the spirit. Learning is much more than what we know or can do. It is about who we are – as individuals, and as people. Learning is the act of embracing what we might become, and it is about becoming better (virtue).

Given our present context of rapid global-social change and the issue of the knowledge of most worth (standards), it is important to see content in a new light. Most of us would agree that the half-life of a baccalaureate degree, that is, the information gained from the study to earn the degree, is now about two years. We are constantly confronted by new information that renders obsolete much of what we think we know. Certainly, knowledge and wisdom are somewhat less dynamic than information, but there are always new conceptualizations of the world that challenge our precepts of the social and natural systems in which we all must live and work. There is a growing body of research and new knowledge within our content fields and pedagogy that we must consider, or suffer the consequences of becoming obsolete. We need to help each other grow - intellectually, spiritually, and as a community (of scholars). As in no other time, scholarship must be given a higher value if learning is to be real.

In the ideal environment, learning becomes a shared responsibility between teacher and student. Rather than serve as providers of information, teachers teach and coach students, ultimately holding them responsible for their own learning. Likewise, teaching becomes a sophisticated form of learning. In the process, young people acquire skills and attitudes - including a love of learning - that will sustain lifelong learning.

Investigation:

1. Learning is a series of rightful habits. This would mean learning not just any habits, but rightful ones. What are these habits? And, how are these habits acquired?
2. What purpose does education serve in your community or school today? Is that purpose helpful or destructive to the development of rightful habits of the mind, body, and spirit?

Civic Work

Here each individual is not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of state as well...We do not say that a man who has no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.

Pericles, 431 B.C.

Civic work, as a philosophical construct, should replace the concept of service learning. Service, or service learning, gives the impression that it is something separate from real life. That it, it is something one does, puts out of mind, and then goes on with living. Work should be understood, on the other hand, as personal and social at the same time. It is at the core of living and meaning. What we need to understand is that all work is civic; it has a public dimension that impacts on others. Work that we do to improve our personal circumstance always effects others. If we do *good* work, that good radiates to others. Of course, poor or bad work also radiates to others, causing a general decline in the health of the community. Work that we do to improve the lot of others also effects us personally, as it will improve our individual circumstance or condition. *My personal wealth is always tied to the common wealth.*

If we think about all kinds and types of work, we will note that we cannot distinguish where private work ends and public work begins. This conception of work provides the individual with

meaning and joy, because it becomes clear that service to another is always service to oneself, and service to oneself is always service to another. In this context, all work is civic work, because we are all part of the community. What Marcus Aurelius said about Rome is still true today, "Thou wilt serve your city and do what is right, not because it is the proper thing to do, but because thereby thou givest thyself pleasure" (1964, p.61).

In this sense, private and public work are one and the same. The trick is to understand this truism and act accordingly. Thus, the argument presented here is that work/service is fundamental to learning, joy, and meaning. Our task, then, is to see all work as civic work and all learning as the fruit of civic work both in its doing and in the reflective connections we construct about purpose and meaning in, and of, life.

Some examples of learning/civic work may help illuminate the connections among virtue, learning, and the enhancement of the common wealth and personal well-being.

- The student who keeps her grades through honest work (using intellectual virtues) and plays on her high school basketball team, is doing civic work by developing potential for future service to her community, and by serving her school as a member of the team. Reflecting on these tasks within the context of civic work will develop virtue in the student through the understanding that her efforts extend beyond self and embrace the community and the future.
- Students who decide to build a playground on an empty city lot and practice rightful habits of mind, heart, and hands are doing civic work by enhancing both the public space and improving their own knowledge and well-being by making the community better. In civic work the rising tide lifts all (virtue).
- A construction worker, building a new house in the community is doing civic work because he understands that quality work will allow his creation to be something others can depend on for a long time. He also learns (constructs) new knowledge that gives him joy and meaning through

personal growth. He builds the house for the client, for the community and for himself. This is civic work.

- An unemployed bank loan officer spends several hours a day talking to business people in the city about developing an employment information network that would link workers and job openings in the region. Her concern for her own employment is tied to what she sees as a more general problem that might be addressed if more leaders would put resources into the issue of general employment levels in the community rather than just the employment level in their firm. This is civic work - work that helps both the community and the individual.

Investigation:

1. Define democratic citizen in terms of virtue, work, learning, and wealth. Why is civic a valued added element in every institution?

Conclusion

These examples suggest a structural link between the private and public work and life of the citizen. They describe the inclusive nature of learning, work, and virtue. Whatever we do, our work has both a private and a public face. If we see work as civic work and if we come to see learning as civic learning, we will come to appreciate the mutual reinforcement of the private and public, we will also begin to understand the positive correlation between private wealth and the common wealth, and we will work to enhance both - together.

This new conceptualization bespeaks the coming economic epoch, which will go far beyond industrial and information work (jobs) and present citizens with a new employment landscape, one defined by the application of virtue and learning to our institutions and the community. That is, employers and employees will need to see their individual well-being directly tied to the health of the

community and all the people living therein. The new economy will demand that we add to the traditional, private notions of work, the integrity of civic work. First of all, without attention to creating common wealth, the new economy will not have the numbers nor types of jobs needed to maintain public happiness. Second, and of much more importance, if we are wise enough to conceptualize civic work and civic learning as our major economic and educational (private and public) policy goals, then, we will become more successful at living in this new economic landscape. Such goals and their attending programs will have our students (citizens) understand that taking the office of citizen seriously is a necessary condition to constructing, nurturing, and maintaining those traits of rightful habits and character fundamental to democracy, capitalism, and the good society. As the free market cannot survive unless it is encased in ethics, a free republic will not endure unless it is directed by high social purpose and individual character. As the coming economy sweeps over all of us, the implementation of these virtues will determine our success and survival as a free people. This is the essential knowledge that one needs to hold the office of citizen in a democratic republic in our time and, perhaps, for all times.

References

- Gardner, Howard. *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach*. (New York: Basic Books, 1991). pp.6-11.
- Hartoonian, H. Michael. "The Philosophical Perspective: The Role of Philosophy in the Education of Democratic Citizens." In Richard E. Gross and Dynneson, T.L., editors, *Social Science Perspectives on Citizenship Education*. (New York and London, Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1991) pp. 195-219.
- Hartoonian, H. Michael, and R. Van Scotter, "School-to-Work: A Model for Learning a Living," *Phi Delta KAPPAN* April 1996, Volume 77, Number 8.
- Helibroner, Robert. *21st Century Capitalism*, (W.W. Norton and Co., NY, 1993).
- Job Hook-up: Skills for the Information Age* (A booklet produced by BellSouth in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Education, Southern Regional Education Board, and Georgia Department of Education). p.3. Copies of *Hook-up* can be obtained free of charge by phoning 800-631-1586.
- Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand Country Almanac*. (New York: Sierra Club/ Ballantine Books, 1973).
- Muller, Jery. *Adam Smith: In His Time and Ours*. (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1993).
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 1983).
- Singer, Peter. *How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*. (Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 1995).
- Sizer, Theodore R. *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992) p.1.
- Smith, Adam. *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. (1959; reprint, New York: A.M. Kelley, 1966).
- Van Scotter, Richard. "What Young People Think About School and Society." *Educational Leadership*. November 1994, pp.72-73.
- Wright, R. *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life*. (Random House, NY, 1994).

Biography

Michael Hartoonian is Director of the Center for Economic Education and Professor of Education at the University of Minnesota. Before coming to Minnesota, Michael served as a Professor of Education and Liberal Studies in the Graduate School, Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota and Director of Graduate programs in Democratic Capitalism and Active Citizenship.

Michael received his B.A. degree in Economics and Mathematics from Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, and his M.A., in History and Education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His Ph.D., also from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is in Curriculum and Instruction-History and the Social Sciences, and Administration.