

The Civic within the More-than-Human World

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THE CIVIC AROSE when the forests were cleared. Life in the clearing constitutes the civic. The expansion of the civic has always been at the expense of the forests. Robert Harrison reminds us that the governing institutions of the West, all of them sanctioned by the prevailing civic culture, “originally established themselves in opposition to the forests.”¹ Our cultural inheritance continues to nurture the perception that the community within which our species dwells, and the one that defines what it means to be responsible selves, is the community of the clearing.

The 2012 report from the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (*A Crucible Moment*),² and the initial volume in Bringing Theory to Practice’s *The Civic Series (Civic Provocations)*,³ reflect the ethos of the clearing. Those publications are confirmations of the felt immediacy of human society as the context sufficient for identifying current educational challenges. Despite scattered references in *A Crucible Moment* and *Civic Provocations* to life beyond the clearing, they seem to suggest that the public good stops where the clearing meets the forests or, to move beyond Harrison’s language, where civic life meets the more-than-human world. This focus reflects, at best, a provincial understanding of what makes human life human. The implied anthropocentrism is disappointing.

Here, then, is my provocation. The first task in “bringing theory to practice” is to disentrall ourselves of any notion of the civic that ignores rather than embraces our fateful entanglements with the natural world. I believe this provocation is aligned with significant cultural changes just beneath the surfaces of public life.

Such changes include a reawakening to our inescapable interdependencies with nature. They also include growing acknowledgement that our civic ideal is flawed through the West’s sustained efforts not only to emancipate our kind from the perceived hostility of nature, but also to claim that we have dominion over nature. We are coming to see the folly of Gilgamesh in ancient Sumeria: as the legend goes, the king cut down all the forests outside his city’s walls so that nothing could be disobedient to his rule. My provocation is that we need to reexamine the insular shape of our civic ideal. We need to be certain that the

inherited construction has the resiliency to guide us through a new age of necessary reconciliations with the earth. This is not a matter of global ethics; it is a matter of caring about varying local ecologies.

The reimagining of the civic through a biocentric perception of our situation is consistent with a commitment to community beyond the self. New emphases must move the commitment beyond the comfort zones typified in current reports and discussions. We need to discern nonhuman variables as having inherent worth deserving of respect. We need a new politics for articulating justice within new precincts. A new calculus of what to conquer and what to preserve must guide development of fresh postulates defining the public good and fresh paradigms for a more robust stewardship of place. Our pursuit of a “more perfect union” must include ensuring the integrity and biodiversity of the earth’s

ecological systems, thereby preserving habitats for those outside the civic. The conservation of land—soils, waters, plants, and animals—needs to accompany the promotion of human welfare.

I want to emphasize this last point. There is an abiding reciprocity between our social order and the patterns of life surrounding us. Nature tutors us with civic lessons. Land nurtures civic dispositions. I cite only three. First, land conserves human memory, sustaining us as historical creatures. Landscapes are vessels of remembrance. When we retrace them, they ignite stories, memories, of what happened to move us along our ways. Simon Schama writes,

“National identity...would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched as a homeland.”⁴ Narratives of the American civic experiment are preserved in particular places: Antietam and Gettysburg, grassland prairies and the Black Hills. Our civic experiment is framed between sea and shining sea.

Second, land also provides a scale for measuring our stature on the great orb, sustaining us as creatures capable of self-knowledge. Nature’s opacity refutes our dominion. It deprives us of vainglory and of accompanying ideologies. Finally, land refreshes our acuity as sensate selves, sustaining our aesthetic tastes and moral empathies. These sensibilities, in turn, help keep us alert to the subtle, intricate, and at times fragile tapestry of our human life together.

To remember whence we have come, to be honest about the limits of our creatureliness, and to sense the different dimensions of harmony and disharmony in all of life, are profoundly important dispositions fostering civility.

It is propitious that our shared task centers on transforming campus cultures into contexts for civic engagement. Of all the institutions shaping democracy, those of higher education may be able to jump in with bold and imaginative renditions of a new ecological civic. The collegiate presence of the sciences and the humanities may help ensure that the social sciences alone do not set the parameters for engagement. The prospect of an increasingly interdisciplinary fabric for reflection may help fortify awareness of the seamless character of life.

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But there is also the campus presence of students whose youthful adventures with the natural world have often—not always, but often—tutored them in the civic lessons cited above. Their very youthfulness brings resiliency for reconciling civic journeys and civic goals with more primordial pathways and distant outcomes of the natural world. My provocation arises in part from hope in our students.

NOTES

1. Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), ix. I am indebted to Harrison's brilliant study for the image of the forests' clearing.
2. National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities 2012). With funding from the U.S. Department of Education to assess the state of civic learning in higher education, GPI, Inc. and the Association of American Colleges and Universities co-directed the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement project for which a national task force was appointed. A series of national roundtable meetings of college presidents, higher education civic researchers, faculty, student affairs staff, civic organizational leaders, philanthropists, and policy makers was held to help shape the National Call to Action that eventually led to the publication of this report.
3. Donald W. Harward, ed., *Civic Provocations* (Washington, DC: Bringing Theory to Practice, 2012).
4. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 15–16.