



Finding common ground and creating the common good

What my family taught me about civic and political life

by Sean Kershaw

Part of my vision for overhauling “civics” education in schools involves wrestling it away from the notion that civics is mostly about government. I think we could benefit from expanding our sense of where we learn and practice civics (the civic role of families, for example) by recognizing that the common good, like a family, is *created*.

As Minnesota turns 150 next year, it is worth thinking about who we are as a state, where we want to go—and what this means for how we practice politics and achieve the common good together, in a state with a lot of new “family members.”

Home is where the civics begins

I’ve always thought of myself as a product of the prairie: the work ethic of the pioneers, and both the endless possibility and impending doom that transformed the land and its people. But my parents’ impending move this summer from the prairies of Nebraska to the portages of Duluth caused me to realize that my civic roots began with my family—not with my geography.

For example, my oldest sister and I should not be as close as we are. It’s not just that her fundamentalist religious beliefs and my sexual orientation are fundamentally at odds with each other. Given the anger and personal attacks that took place after I came out to her years ago, we had more than enough ammunition to justify a generation of animosity. How could we ever re-build a relationship when I was no more going to change her religious beliefs than she would change the gender of my spouse?

But this is far from the reality of our relationship. We each forgave our first reactions, and our father insisted on patience and tolerance as my sister and I moved forward together. What surprises most people is that we are probably closer than we’ve ever been, and what we’ve learned in the process is perhaps instructive for all of us as we think about what common ground and common good really mean.

My family experiences have taught me that the common good exists—but that it is created, not found.

Conflict and commonality

Despite our differences, we were able to discover common ground as a family that was more powerful than these differences—more powerful perhaps because of these differences.

To start with, we are both parents. It’s ironic and sort of funny how much we both appreciate each other’s parenting skills—no less for the fact that we’ve both adopted children than for the humility that accompanies all parenthood. We care enormously about our own parents as well. We’ve also discovered how much we have in common when it comes to public policy and politics. We’ve gained new respect for each other by working together on shared goals and aspirations (our parents, our children, issues like education), not by rehashing what we weren’t going to change.

Did her views about my sexual orientation change? No. Have we gained more than we’ve lost? Absolutely. I am incredibly proud of what we’ve accomplished together, and it has enhanced my love for the everyday practice of civic and political work. Because of her, I know that I can find common ground with people or groups that I may think I disagree with strongly.

Family members can disown each other, but they don’t stop being family. Our identity as family created a common ground to work together. I could complain about her to my brothers behind her back, but I still had to face her across the Thanksgiving table.

Creating common good

As greater mobility has increased our ability to physically separate ourselves as citizens

from each other (living in like-minded neighborhoods and moving into ideological-online ghettos), perhaps there is something in this Thanksgiving table lesson: exactly what is the “common good” anyway?

If you listen to Democrats long enough, you’ll think that the common good is a section of the DFL platform or a coffee house in a hip neighborhood. It *exists*. They know what it is. Go find it. If you listen to Republicans long enough, you’ll think that common good is a hallucination. A relic. A touchy-feely dream that is out of touch with reality. It *cannot* exist.

My family experiences have taught me that the common good exists—but that it is created, not found. It’s the unconscious byproduct of what my sister and I worked through together all too consciously. The common good is what a diverse public creates together with a common vision, shared civic values and goals—and a common identity as citizens.

Our Minnesota family

Is there a common identity—and a common destiny—for us as citizens of a new Minnesota family, an identity that transcends our ideological, ethnic/racial and single-issue differences? And can this identity bridge the difference created by our self-imposed geographic and philosophic isolation? I think so. We saw it in the MAP 150 interviews last summer. Minnesotans care about education, about healthcare, and about the future for our kids and our parents. We are hungry for the opportunity to find common ground and create a new common good.

Given the realities of modern mobility, we won’t create this collective identity because we’re forced to by geographic proximity and social mixing. We’ll do so ultimately because we want to, because we want to see its rewards, and because we’ll need to in order to confront the policy and political challenges facing this 150-year-old family. ●

Sean Kershaw is the Executive Director of the Citizens League and can be reached at skershaw@citizensleague.org. You can comment on this Viewpoint at: www.citizensleague.org/blogs/sean.