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**Helping America to Become Unlost**

I want to write about making our country “unlost.”

While in New York City last week for a vacation, I visited the new One World Trade Center in Manhattan.

Being at Ground Zero reminded me of how our country came together after that horrific day. There was no arbitrary line-drawing by political affiliation or socioeconomic standing. No, for a few months we were just “Americans,” having each other’s backs and vowing to rebuild.

Fast forward nearly sixteen years and the political/societal landscape in America is completely different. As Thomas Friedman reports, we’ve entered an era of “sectarian politics” (as in Sunni vs. Shiite, Israeli vs. Palestinian) where we’ve become so incredibly polarized—you’re either extremely left or extremely right with no real middle ground for compromise. This “I’m right, you’re wrong; I win, you lose; us vs. them” mentality is sapping the lifeblood from our democracy.

The polarization also exists by socioeconomic status and majority race vs. minority race.

We are, I fear, close to a point-of-no-return where something big will happen to permanently alter fundamental beliefs on which America—our special land unlike any other—is premised. I fear we’ve already become partially lost as a nation and as a people. The question: can we find our way back?

Can we get “unlost”?

There’s so much to do to become unlost. Here are some ideas:

1. We Must Get Back to the Basics, Like Adhering to Pledges and Oaths. Recall the Pledge of Allegiance:

*I **pledge allegiance** to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."*

When is the last time you thought about these words, particularly, “**one Nation** under God, **indivisible**, with **liberty and justice for all**”?

There's no wiggle room in this pledge for divisions along political ideology or class. "Indivisible" is just that—Americans shouldn't be arbitrarily grouped and labeled. Similarly, "all" means "all" relative to ensuring for liberty and justice. The Pledge isn't conditional on how much money you make or the color of your skin or the religion you practice.

Each American must be reminded about the meaning of the Pledge of Allegiance. Surely, that meaning is something that we can all agree on, yes?

Likewise, we need to dramatically elevate the public understanding that every elected official begins their service with an oath pledging to uphold the values inherent in the constitution of their state or the U.S. Constitution. The bedrock of those values is putting the interests of their constituents/state/country ahead of one's own personal interests. Politicians who violate this rule must be held accountable and voted out of office.

2. The Legal Community Must Educate on the Role of Compromise. As a trial lawyer of nearly thirty years, I learned the importance of compromise. Rarely, if ever, did my clients (or those who opposed me) get everything they wanted in a dispute. Practicing law, by its nature, is the art of finding common ground to reach compromise. The legal community needs to step up and take the lead on educating the public about the value of compromising to resolve differences.

3. We Should Empower and Elevate Mediators. Most people don't understand what mediators do. (Mediators are trained neutrals who help people resolve their differences through negotiation.) Mediators establish ground rules for fair, honest conversation and negotiation. The State of Minnesota has a mediation-based agency, the Bureau of Mediation Services (and within that, the Office of Collaboration and Dispute Resolution). Collectively, we need to empower mediators to do more; we must also elevate their public profile as a resource that's available to everyone to bridge differences.

4. There Must be More Purposeful Cooperative Engagement. The best way to get to know someone who differs from you (whether that's due to race, politics, class or religion) is to perform a common undertaking—building a playground, painting the offices of a nonprofit, rehabbing housing for the elderly or low-income persons. Local political parties (Democrats, Republicans, the Green Party, etc.) should come together to identify joint projects for cooperative, mixed engagement; then members of those parties should jointly undertake the projects. Afterward, there should be cross-party discussions and a meal (food is a great equalizer!) after the project is completed.

5. Political and Community Leaders Should Undergo Poverty Training. Our leaders often make decisions about low-income persons and their communities without understanding what it means to be poor in America. As someone who's undergone such training, I can attest to there being much that I (a privileged white person) didn't understand about living in poverty. (For example, do you know what the *maximum* income is for food stamps? Answer: for a family of four, it's \$31,536.) Every political and community leader whose decisions affect low-income Americans should receive

training like that offered by Communication Across Barriers, Inc. founder Donna Beegle (<https://www.combarriers.com/>). Only then can one get an idea of what it means to “walk in the shoes” of someone less privileged.

6. Everyone Should Receive Inclusivity Training. I have a goal that every Minnesotan (all six million of us) will receive two hours of training on how to be more inclusive and welcoming to anyone who is “different” from “us.” This is in line with my belief that regardless of political or religious standing, most humans want to do the right thing—only, most don’t know what that right thing is or they’re afraid to undertake it. Let’s give people the tools to get past their fears or ignorance so they can be more open to others and their ideas/perspectives.

7. We Must De-Legitimize Money as a Political and Social Cornerstone. I know, of all the items here, this is the craziest. Yet, if we’re really going to get back to the values underlying the Pledge of Allegiance and public service oaths, we’re got to at least start calling out the truth: money corrupts those values. It also creates barriers—even on the simplest levels, as in “lunch shaming” where elementary schools stigmatize students who can’t afford to pay for a hot lunch. We’ve got to talk about how money oppresses people and fosters greater divisions between “us” and “them.”

8. We Need to Open Our Minds by Reading. I don’t think it’s mere coincidence that the rise of identity-aligned media (Fox News vs. MSNBC; Rush Limbaugh vs. NPR) occurred while newspaper readership significantly declined. By selective viewing or listening, we’ve lost exposure to other ideas and perspectives. There must be a push (hello librarians and educators, are you listening?) to teach about the perils of one-sided information intake and encouragement to do the hard work of reading up on/attempting to understand others’ perspectives and ideas.

9. Empower the Idealists. I’m certain there are many idealists who, if encouraged, would show up to do the hard work of imagining and working to close the divisions between Americans. However, being idealistic has gone out of vogue; in today’s America, it’s often all about how much money you make or have (see point 7) or the number of people who follow you on social media. We need to again make it “cool” to be idealistic. Doing so will give us a new set of leaders; for the most part, the current crop of leaders has done nothing but lead us to where we are today—lost as a country.

10. Look Around and Open Your Eyes; Admit that We’ve Become Lost. Getting “unlost” requires extreme honesty—we must at least admit that as a country, we have drifted far from the democratic values (pluralism, a respective exchange of ideas, compromising for the greater good) that made America the world’s beacon. That honesty requires self-examination about how we’ve become lazy—it’s so much easier to simply accept a sound bite than to take the time to investigate for one’s self. Similarly, it’s way easier to simply dismiss someone else for their point of view than it is to engage them and listen (and maybe find common ground or a compromise). If we don’t start to be honest (and engage in honest dialogue), we really will be lost for good.

Sure, there's a lot here. And yep, I know that much of the above sounds naïve and simplistic. Still, something (actually, so very much) needs to be done. I fear for our country. If you have a similar fear, will you join me in working to get America unlost? (A good starting point would be to share this blog post with your networks...)

Thank you! I welcome your thoughts.

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