

## ***THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF ASSOCIATION IN DEMOCRATIC LIFE AND EXPERIENCE***

Remarks by Dr. William B. Allen, Director  
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Good evening. Thank you Delegate Katzen for an inspiring invocation. And thanks to Dr. Lois Williams and the Directors for the honor of this occasion.

It's a joy to be here with you this evening and to assist as your speaker with the large and noble venture you have undertaken through The Children's Connection. One of my most fervent beliefs is that, in a moral society, each generation has an obligation to offer the gift of education to its progeny. And, in a moral society, all children are our progeny. Through the scholarship funds that you raise, you make that gift a reality for individuals for whom it might otherwise remain only a dream and a hope. Because many of my fondest memories derive from my labors in cognate causes, I honor your vision, your contribution of time, energy, and funds—and your success.

Before offering some brief remarks on “The Vital Importance of Association in Democratic Life and Experience,” I shall invoke a “speaker's privilege” to say a few words about one of the leaders who will be honored this evening - John Padgett.

I've worked for John, in his capacity as Chairman of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, for nearly a year now. I've come to know John as a caring individual, deeply committed to making a difference in the lives of people in the Hampton Roads community and throughout Virginia. He gives tirelessly of his time, energy, and vision to the Council.

Somehow, despite the long hours of service to the Commonwealth in that setting, John also finds time to contribute to his community in many other ways. I know that one volunteer activity he has especially enjoyed has been coaching in the Norfolk Naval Base Little League. Having also coached a baseball team or two in my day, I know that coaching is not only a great way to connect with kids, but also to connect with America and to learn about life. *In God's Country and Mine*, Jacque Barzun says, “Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball.” Here are three pointers that baseball has taught me, which John might also recognize:

1. As Babe Ruth tells us, “Never let the fear of striking out get in your way.”
2. And, in the words of Frederick B. Wilcox, we need to remember that “Progress al-

ways involves risks. You can't steal second base and keep your foot on first."

3. But, we also need to know when to cut our losses. I remember the day that I approached a nervous little league pitcher who had just walked a third straight batter. "Son," I said, "I think you've had enough." The young fellow tried to argue with me. "Look who's coming up to bat. I struck this guy out the last time he was up." I could only respond, "Yeah, I know. But this is still the same inning."

I'll conclude my praise for John by noting that he tells a joke about as well as anyone I know. I'm sure many here this evening have enjoyed a few of his tall tales.

But I'm not quite finished with baseball. Another lesson that we learn from baseball or other team sports is the value and joy of association - of groups coming together for a common purpose. It's not just the kids on the baseball or soccer field who gain from their communal experience of playing, learning, competing, and stretching their limits but also the families joined together on the sidelines to cheer and support the team. From shared association, these families and their kids learn lessons that are quite different from those one might learn by "bowling alone."

In his widely read article of that title ("Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital"), Robert Putnam asserts that one of the most vital elements of American democracy has been the high level of civic and group engagement. Putnam reminds us of Alex de Tocqueville's observation in *Democracy in America* that:

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types - religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. . . Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.

Putnam goes on, in the article, to analyze a number of indicators that suggest that participation in associations, churches, neighborhoods, and families is dwindling. The decline of these time-honored mechanisms for building civic engagement connectedness may already have diminished the vitality of American democracy. Further decline could yet occur.

Putnam concludes the article by urging, us to place "High on America's agenda.... the question of how to reverse these adverse trends in social connectedness, thus restoring civic engagement and civic trust."

I want to suggest, very briefly, that liberal education is one of the best tools we have available for reversing that trend.

I have spoken often - during my tenure in Virginia and previously - about the role of liberal education in developing educated citizens. This evening I highlight liberal educa-

tion's role in developing engaged citizens.

A crucial element in developing engaged citizens involves the ways that higher learning contributes to community building and is, itself, best done in community. For at the heart of learning and at the heart of democracy lie informed dialog and willingness to engage with multiple perspectives in an atmosphere of openness

Earlier in this century John Dewey wrote that "the purpose of education was to create, in our students and ourselves, the capacity for associative living." He saw associative living as the foundation of a "moral democracy." Whatever one may think of the pragmatic educational compromises engendered by much of Dewey's theorizing, I do embrace the fundamental goal of developing "a form of learning directly suited to the open-ended and collaborative task of building democracy as a participatory, moral, and justice-seeking framework for lives lived in common" - as Lee Knefelkamp recently described his work.

Lee Knefelkamp identified five core ideas in Dewey's philosophy, among which three bear emphasis tonight:

- The distinctive worth and capacity of every individual;
- The belief that in democracy, as in science, it is the combination of multiple and different understandings that makes progress attainable; and
- The insistence that this kind of learning is a lifelong endeavor and commitment, not a matter for schools alone.

No, this kind of learning is not a matter for schools alone. It remains true, however, at colleges and universities across the nation and particularly here in Virginia, that a reinvigorated focus fosters not only the growth of each individual student in intellect and character but also strengthening each student's capacity to form social and civic connections with others. An antidote, if you will, to time spent bowling alone, watching television alone, playing computer games alone.

Colleges and universities are not alone in this endeavor. Other organizations and community leaders are also exploring ways to build new models and to recapture the spirit of association that de Tocqueville saw as central to American democracy. In an essay in *Education and Democracy: Re-imagining Liberal Learning in America*, Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, describes the emergence of a new and "different model of fruitful human interrelatedness and interdependency." She detects at the heart of this model, "face-to-face, creative, engaged discussion among respectfully differing people that is throughout open-minded, exploratory, fallibilistic."

In the short time we have this evening, I can only glance across the surface of what is in truth a deep and complex topic. I suspect, from the very fact of your involvement with The Children's Connection, that the concept of civic engagement and a belief in the vital power of association, is not new to you. I want to close, therefore, by connecting these concepts

and beliefs to the Council's work-in-progress - the *1999 Virginia Plan for Higher Education*.

The Council is charged by the Commonwealth with the responsibility to update the long-term, strategic plan for higher education in Virginia every two years. The *1999 Plan* is nearing completion and will be discussed by the Council at its meeting next Tuesday. A copy of the draft plan is on SCHEV's website, if you would like to read it. The address is - <http://www.schev.edu/wumedia/agenda0499/0499agendapress.pdf>. Please scroll down to page 90.

At the center of the 1999 Plan is a shared vision of post-secondary education that offers to every - and I want to underscore every - citizen of Virginia full opportunity to attain a baccalaureate credential. Wide access to higher education has long been one of the overarching goals for higher education in Virginia - along with quality, affordability, and accountability. What may be new in the 1999 Plan - and I would like to hear your thoughts on this - is to say more clearly than ever that the goal is universal access.

It is the role of higher education in developing engaged citizens that fuels the ambition for nearly universal access to higher education.

Virginia citizens fundamentally believe and expect that investing in the education of individual citizens promotes the overall well being of society. We look to education not only as the chief vehicle to promote the well being of the current generation, but also as a gift and legacy that each generation offers the next.

Through the work of The Children's Connection, that gift will be given to many additional students in the Hampton Roads area. You who are here tonight demonstrate what engaged citizenship is all about. At the same time, you enable dozens of young people to learn, through their college education, how to build and sustain democracy.

Vaclav Havel once said, "I am not an optimist because I do not believe that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist because I do not believe that everything ends badly. But I could not accomplish anything if I did not carry hope within me, for the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself." I will argue with President Havel here as I have done before, in discussing with him a constitution for his country. An optimist, as my teacher once said, believes that this is the worst of all possible worlds (any change would be for the better); while a pessimist believes this is the best of all worlds (any change would be for the worse). The hope President Havel offers is a clear, educated view of the world. Such a view surveys everything in terms of better or worse, sees this world not as the worst or the best but as the one we have, and prepares to be educated by reason as to how to avoid making it worse and how modestly

Thank you for the hope, the faith, and the love that you have shown through your support of The Children's Connection.