

Astonishment, Complexity, Compassion – Building a Civil Society

An address presented by Diana Gale
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Here is a “big question” for all of us to consider:

How does one individual contribute to making our civil society more responsive to the needs of people and the earth? How does one participate in making a more civil society?

I believe that one person does make a difference, and that success comes in community and interdependence. I also believe in government, and I believe that people deserve good government. But, even I can see that there are many instances that illustrate how government is broken.

In fact, I don't think we really know how to govern. We aspire to it and are doing it better than in the past. But, there is not one sure model that works. In this era we are caught in a conflict between the power of the mega-global business and what Frances Lappe calls “thin democracy” in which we vote and shop. I get disappointed sometimes, and I imagine that you do, too. However, we have been blessed in the Northwest with good government and commitment to progressive liberal principles – Democratic and Republican. Yet – we can all see that improvements can be made.

How can an individual stand steady in all the changes of our society and make sense of what is going on – let alone “make a difference?” I offer a few thoughts on this, crafted partly by looking backward at what has worked in the past. I am also reflecting on the threads of continuity I have been able to draw upon when I was challenged by a complex, difficult situation and had to work my way through it.

Lessons Learned from the History of our Region

Confucius' great blessing and curse was: **“May you live in interesting times.”** And we do! Our past gives us some clues to why we do things the way we do today. We tend to “evolve” government and hopefully learn from the lessons of the past.

If you look backward before you look forward, you can often learn the lessons about what worked and what didn't. But, we can't get hooked on the past – the future will be different. Dean Marc Lindenberg at the Evans School at the University of Washington asserts that, “Each generation creates its own possibilities.”

We in this region have been blessed with good government. I personally worked with three great committed Mayors – Charlie Royer, Norm Rice and Paul Schell, and with great City Council members such as Paul Kraabel, Tim Hill, Jan Drago, Martha Choe, Margaret Pageler, and Jim Street. All of these people believed in the importance of the commons and worked to protect the vulnerable in our community.

In my time Seattle has also always had an independent streak – we need to invent it here – and nothing is too complicated or complex. We can figure it out. We have wanted to be on the “cutting edge” – but not on the “bleeding edge.”

We have seen change in what propels government. We have moved through a number of stages, from what I would characterize as the “great man theory” to an era of collaboration and accountability.

Government under the “great man theory”

In the 1950s and 60s a smart and public-spirited man like Jim Ellis could meet with a small group of community-minded men at the Rainier Club and decide how to clean up Lake Washington or build the Convention Center over the freeway – and actually make it happen. This was our “great man” era of government.

Citizen involvement

I started my “citizen action” in the late 60s working on Paul Schell’s effort to define “Seattle 2000” He brought people together to create a future 25-30 years ahead in order to define what our city might look like. His ideas of community and citizen participation seemed radical at the time. Today they are essential to how we do our work.

Good government interest groups and neighborhood empowerment

Starting in the mid-70s Seattle became a community in which interest groups could meet together and pound out policies and agreement on issues such as desegregation and school funding – the issues I especially cared about. The groups were diverse: Seattle Urban League, League of Women Voters, Muni League, Council of Churches, Allied Arts, Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable. Civic leadership grew out of these groups and individuals honed their communication and collaboration skills by participating in them.

It was still possible to bring the key interests together around one medium-sized table. And, the groups were civic-based good-government groups and not special interests. It required a special ability to communicate and coordinate their interests and Charlie Royer emerged with those communication and community building skills. He worked through school desegregation, recycling and neighborhood empowerment.

Visionary regional leadership

In the 1990s the demands became more complex and we had to work as a region. Norm Rice and Martha Choe became the first regional leaders who reached out to the whole county to solve problems of water, environment, and transportation. Norm Rice defined and initiated concepts of a “livable downtown” and “urban villages.”

Collaboration and accountability

Today's complexities have only increased. The Puget Sound Partnership is a new effort by the Governor and the Legislature to restore the health of Puget Sound by 2020. It is an "uber example" of community involvement and complexity. There are 175 different government agencies (federal, state and local) that need to be involved as well as tribes, businesses, citizens, environmental groups and nonprofits. Not only do they not fit at a table – they won't all fit in a room. And yet, their individual interests and concerns must be listened to, paid attention to and acted upon in an authentic, transparent and accountable manner.

Evolution of government

So...in my short life working in the community we have evolved significantly – from a lone-person style of leadership to a style which requires the ability to build group consensus, collaboration, and connections. We have also evolved to a different type of visionary leadership in which the leader is capable of suppressing his or her ego to "the commons" or greater good.

Puget Sound Partnership is an example of a new challenge to the commons– restoring a body of water that will require figuring out how to preserve both our economy and also our natural environment. It also brings the challenge of integrating the interests of all the special interests to solve a common but complex problem in a society that loves its independence and its ability to design its own solutions. We need to align peoples' hearts and actions to take steps that will make a difference. And we have to be able to describe this problem in a way that inspires individuals to change their behaviors and spend money to protect a regional asset. It requires the skills of ALL the previous eras and a stronger connection to science and technology.

So when I thought about what held me steady in the midst of all these changes, I came to the three concepts that form the title of my talk:

Astonishment, complexity and compassion

The question I asked myself is, "How does one person stand still, make sense of all these changes and have the courage to be a responsible member of a civil society?" These three words hold the keys to the strategies that have worked for me.

Astonishment: Seeing the Vision

**"My work is loving the world...
Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
Which is mostly standing still and learning to be
Astonished**

- Mary Oliver (from "Messenger" in Thirst)

I believe that any new action – small or large – starts with astonishment. Astonishment is the emotional experience of seeing something new, seeing it freshly. One can be astonished with either wonder or outrage. Astonishment establishes a height or a magic place you want to be – or a base – outrage at what is going on. The work of the world occurs in the space between the

outrage and the wonder. We try to move our world closer to the wonder and away from the outrage. Astonishment creates our vision and our passion to move toward that vision.

Puget Sound is one example of this.

We wonder at its beauty: watching an orca jump, examining barnacles in a tide pool, seeing herons fishing at low tide

We are outraged by the horrors we experience: creosote logs pouring toxics onto shellfish; lost fish nets strangling a baby seal; in a restored urban creek, storm water pollutant loadings suffocating a salmon returning to spawn.

We want to fix these problems – to identify what it is that is eroding the Sound; to determine what actions we can take to preserve and restore what makes it special and magical. It will take leadership and committed citizens (leading and participating) to figure out how to work in this space between outrage and wonder and to close the gap between the horror and the beauty of Puget Sound. We have done it in the past. We can do it again, just as Jim Ellis and a small group of committed citizens did it when they figured out how to clean up Lake Washington.

Astonishment is the foundation of leadership (and each of you is a leader). It is about being astounded by a **vision** of a better tomorrow, and seeing what needs to be fixed – seeing **the gap** between the present and an imaged future – and experiencing the courage to build **partnerships** to make a change. Vision and passion come from being astonished about something that needs to be changed.

Complexity: Solving the Problem

Once you know what you want to do you need to figure out what it will take to fix it – that is where complexity comes in.

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. – John Muir

Complexity is about figuring out where to start. It always begins with recognizing and honoring the fact that “it is not simple.” The simple problems have already been solved; we are left with the tough ones. It also requires recognizing that problems are all tied up together – like John Muir said. They are not simple to pull apart; but to solve them you have to pull them into pieces and take one piece at a time without losing your vision of the whole.

In the past there were other images of how the work of the world got done. Some people get stuck in believing in one old model; whereas the complexity of today requires the capacity and skill to combine them all.

- **Management by Objective (MBO):** In the 50s and 60s MBO enthusiasts assumed that solving problems was a linear process and you needed order and structure to get to a solution.
- **Citizen Participation:** In the late 60s new concepts appeared on the scene – “citizen participation” and program evaluation and assessment. Today citizen participation – though essential – can become a paralyzing concept.

- **Diversity and leadership:** In the 70s all small groups had to be diverse and we began to say that “leadership” would solve our problems – even though there were many different ways to define a leader, small group actions, diversity and leadership.
- **Adaptive management:** Now; we focus on how to use effectively sophisticated concepts from science and technology. We use communications strategies to spin our story and collaborative partnerships to engage a range of interests. The new learning style is to adaptively manage what we learn from all of this to change strategies in light of new knowledge.

What is important is not that one concept is better than another, but the realization that the work of the world has evolved and become more complex. Underlying your ability to understand the complexity in the world around you **is having a “causal story”** – a theory of where you **think** you are going so that you can see the deviations. You pay attention to where you are and where you think you are going. Then you adaptively manage in light of what you have learned from facts, science and technology.

So...Complexity requires disciplined attention. I like to say you need to “discipline your intuition.” You have to have an intuition of what you think is going on; then you need to discipline that intuition with logical, orderly analysis. Your intuition provides the vision of where you are going; your discipline gives you the structure for how to work through the parts of it.

Complexity also requires getting to a place of profound simplicity: having the wisdom to see the big picture and the communication skills to describe it (as Ron Heifetz says, “getting on the balcony” – looking out over the dance floor to see the patterns and the interactions). Profound simplicity is the act of seeing the forest through the trees. **So...now we need to ask ourselves what is the profound simplicity of our times???**

An Example -- Puget Sound Partnership:

The Puget Sound Partnership is the ultimate in complexity – we have the opportunity to be a model of a new way of solving environmental system problems – but we need to figure out how to align and coordinate the vision, science, government and people’s behaviors. We need a vision of how to improve the health of the Sound, science to tell us what to do, government to enact rules and provide incentives to make it happen, and people to believe they can change enough to protect the Sound under pressures from growth.

Good public education and communications will be keys to our success. These tools will help us describe the challenge with a profound simplicity that will motivate people to change behavior because they WANT to see the Sound preserved for their grandchildren.

Compassion: Finding the well-spring for the call to action.

“The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain...until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.” -- Jane Addams

Compassion can be a difficult word to understand. At the recent Seeds of Compassion conference in Seattle, the Dalai Lama and Bishop Tutu talked about how compassion grew in their hearts. What emerged for me was that compassion is a feeling of deep sympathy or empathy for another – but it must be accompanied by a strong desire to take an action to alleviate the suffering. Compassion must be a combination of empathy tied to action. Both are important.

Compassion is also connected to love – love of family, friends, community, and the natural world. Compassion is built through experiences, relationships, hard knocks, recoveries, forgiveness, and spirituality. We learn compassion through community.

It was working with Rev Carla Berkedal Pryne from St. Mark’s Cathedral when she started Earth Ministry that I first got in touch with the roots of my environmental concerns. She framed a new concept for me – she “astonished me” – in her characterization of our responsibility to care for creation. It is not enough to care for each other and have compassion for the poor and oppressed – we also have to take care of the earth and its creatures.

So my “compassion” began for the earth and its creatures. It had probably started much earlier when as a child I had played with my sister on a creek at my grandfather’s farm where we would create “beauty spots.” We would find large leaves to serve as boats for small frogs or crickets to sail through our beauty spots.

But now my deep-seated feelings have become a new awareness. For now I personally need to take actions to respond to global warming, grow in harmony with the earth, and save and restore the precious natural world for my children and grandchildren. Chief Sealth, the Northwest’s first environmentalist, said, **“Man does not own the earth; he borrows it from his children and grandchildren.”** That is a profoundly simple thought. It may be “the profound simplicity” of our times. What are YOU doing to preserve the world for your children and grandchildren?

The critical skills embedded in having compassion are **“to listen, to hear, to respect what you are hearing, and to pay attention to what is going on.”** Then... to take action.

**Action – our way of building the civil society
A civil society requires both active leadership and membership.**

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." - Margaret Mead

Action is embedded in compassion. The banner of the homeless magazine “Real Change” says, “Compassion is empathy with responsibility.” You not only have to care about something you have to **do** something about it.

I worry about a lot of things in our world and our society – the cost of housing, the cost of education, young people becoming saddled with debt for getting educated, our broken health care system, the poor and the homeless. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed at all the problems I care about and have compassion for – and how little ability I have to fix all those things.

I have had to come to an understanding with myself that I can't fix all those things and that being overwhelmed is not a useful state of energy. I can, however, take small actions and stay informed and pay attention to what is going on around me; I can be engaged in my community on one or two issues that I care about; I can talk to friends and colleagues about how I feel and what it will take to have a better tomorrow; I can give time and treasure to organizations where I think I can make a difference.

I, personally, have chosen to focus my work on the environmental and the arts. For me, art – in my case, the Seattle Opera – is a way to replenish energy, joy, beauty. The excellence of Seattle Opera astonishes me and replenishes my energy. I believe that we need to have beauty and imagination in our lives in order to have the energy to tackle other complex and difficult problems.

So – for me, action is about deciding where to make a difference. Each of us must choose what it is that we want to give our time and treasure to; and how much time and treasure we have. Each time I recycle a bottle I make a difference. I think of my taxes as paying my membership dues in a civil society. My taxes pay for infrastructure, sidewalks, pothole repair, water, sewer, homeless shelters.

When I contribute to the Seattle Opera or People for Puget Sound or Whidbey Institute I know I am giving some energy and lifeblood to other excellent people who are carrying a ball that I cannot carry. I cannot do it all myself – no one can – not even the President of the United States. We all need to be “active members” in our civil society – citizens committed to improving our world. So building a civil society is all about taking personal responsibility and personal action for fixing problems we care about.

This is a time when Goethe's vision of action has new meaning when he said centuries ago:

"Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."

Tying all the pieces together

I have said that you need to:

- **Stand still and be astonished**
- **Unravel the ball of complexity through disciplined attention**
- **Stay compassionate about a value**
- **Take a stand**

I believe that we need to have a different ethic, a different “big idea,” a new profound simplicity that involves living lightly on the land, modest resource consumption, interdependence and

community building. We need to decide **what type of world** we want technology to fix and build. We need to spend more time building a civil society and taking actions and less time consuming and buying stuff.

It is now our collective job to hold out the belief that we can right our ship. And when I see the people in this room and know your values, commitment and the way you are leading your lives, I have hope and optimism. I am astonished:

- That you have taken the concept of the commons seriously and live lives of commitment that evidence compassion for the lives of others
- That you have adopted a value of “enough” – I have enough – I only need so much
- That you are living lives built on community and interdependence
- That you are caring for creation

So – I have hope and optimism for the future and the future of all our grandchildren.

The lessons I have learned in working with all of you have been:

1. **Learn from the past** about what works and what doesn't. Pay attention to what is going on and what is causing change.
2. **Be astonished by the beauty of the world** and see the gaps between what we are and what we could be. Know that our work is to move toward the wonder and away from the outrage.
3. **Respect complexity** and know that it is not simple to make a difference – and that everyone has to be involved.
4. **Trust your intuition – discipline it, order it** – and let it lead you to a profoundly simple way of knowing what you want to do
5. **Care deeply for the earth and for others;** remember we borrow our world from our grandchildren
6. **Do something you are passionate about,** knowing that a few small steps make a difference when magnified by many people
7. **Have gratitude for all that is wonderful in the world around us** – our friends, our families, the wilderness, your garden, the Sound
8. **Be optimistic and hopeful** that our world will evolve in a good way and that people can make a difference in improving life or others.
9. **Have Fun:** you only live once and joy and appreciation are the lubricants of happiness.

We started with Mary Oliver and astonishment; let's end with her profound question. When you wake up in the morning, ask yourself: **“What will you do with your one, wild precious life”**

Dr. Diana Gale is Senior Lecturer Emeritus at the Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington. She is the former Director of Seattle Public Utilities and the City of Seattle Office of Management and Budget. Currently she is a member of the Leadership Council of the Puget Sound Partnership, appointed by Governor Gregoire. Gale has received numerous national and local awards for outstanding civic leadership. She is an exceptional colleague and mentor for many. She has had extensive volunteer community involvement in the arts and the environment, including board positions with the Seattle Opera and the Seattle Chamber Music Festival. She has recently completed six years as a member of the board of the Whidbey Institute.