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The Other Side

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A Revolution of the Senses

John McKnight offers a vision in which we all have a place



COMMUNITY IS THE MOST misappropriated word of our time. It's ironic that a culture and era so marked by the erosion of community is so fond of evoking it.

John McKnight is a prophetic voice calling us to confront community—its costs and its counterfeits—honestly. An organizer in the Saul Alinsky tradition and a social visionary influenced by Ivan Illich, McKnight has worked with struggling communities all over the world. He's walked in them, lived in them, been inspired by them. He tells their stories.

His book *Building Communities From the Inside Out* shares stories of neighborhoods reborn. "Why Servanthood is Bad," a 1989 article exploring community empowerment (reprinted in our November-December 1995 anniversary issue) is one of the most provocative and popular pieces *The Other Side* has ever published.

John McKnight reminds us that meaningful discussion of visionary political life and public policy begins in our communities. Local. Specific. Building on the gifts of those in them. Building from within.

Let the work begin.

—Dee Dee Risher

Why should people participate in the elections this year?

WHEN I'M ASKED WHY we should vote, I usually respond that I vote as a way of doing something about the state of pestilence in our nation.

Because of my own work and experience, I am particularly concerned with cities in the United States. I believe our metropolitan areas encompass the interests of the majority of Americans.

I am always struck when I go to an American city and then compare it to a Canadian or European city. People in the United States are greatly given to self-praise—yet the reality is that we have the most miserable cities in the modernized world. One cannot visit any other modernized country and not return being ashamed of our U.S. cities.

The word *citizen* comes from the word for city. Our most fundamental ideas about

Called to Something Better

BY ART GISH

I HATE ELECTION YEARS. The level of public debate deteriorates, people become less rational, and I hear my friends supporting ridiculous positions in order to get their lesser-of-two-evils candidates elected.

Which is not to say I am not deeply concerned about what is happening in the political arena. I am. And I know that biblical faith is intensely political. But Christian political involvement must be lived under the lordship of Jesus. Christians are citizens of another reign and are called to live by a new reality.

It is this other reality that I want for the base and focus of my life. We cannot let ourselves be seduced by the corrupt politics of the Democratic and Republican parties. We are called to something different, something better.

I will probably vote in November, but I do not intend to vote for either Bill Clinton or Bob Dole—both of whom I find disgusting. I might vote for Ralph Nader, or some minor fourth-party candidate, just to send the message that I care, that I object, that I want real alternatives.

I am willing to let the government know my opinions on any subject if they ask me, and sometimes even when they don't ask me. So I am willing to vote, but I am not willing to vote for candidates or positions I consider evil. I am not willing to choose the lesser evil.

I sometimes vote in local contests when I see a clear difference in the candidates. But I do not vote for sheriffs, prosecutors, judges, and other offices that seem contrary to the teachings of Jesus.

I suggest that the burden of proof be on deciding to vote, not on deciding not to vote. As far as I am concerned, we ought not to vote at all or for any candidate unless we have a sound basis for doing so.

More important than voting is the ongoing process of developing alternatives. Only alternatives will make it possible to go down new roads, educating and organizing, building support for other options, undercutting the support for oppressive structures and policies.

When November comes and this way-too-long election season is over, I will give a big sigh of relief. And I will continue to give my allegiance to my Lord. Long after the polls have closed, I hope to be busy with the never-ending task of working on new social and communal alternatives in this fallen society. **xxx**

ART GISH manages the garden for New Covenant Fellowship near Athens, Ohio. He recently spent five weeks in Palestine with Christian Peacemaker Teams.

democracy come from ancient Greece, including our concepts of city and citizen. So, in a very basic sense, the primary measure of our democracy is our cities. If the city is a measure of our citizenship and democracy, then we are the dregs of all comparable nations.

It is almost unimaginable that a country with such wealth and resources has, in the course of a century, used up and thrown away its cities. We have accepted the idea that a large number of our citizens should live in the junk heap.

Many people seem to believe that the state of our cities is inevitable, that we can't do anything about it.

IT'S NOT INEVITABLE—but unfortunately, it doesn't bother people too much.

The majority of people in metropolitan areas ignore the city. We have become inured to television and newspaper reports of the cities' maladies. And—though I don't like to throw the word around lightly—that acceptance is essentially racist. The White population comes to believe that they are not the victims of the junk heap.

I believe the city is the great, gaping sore of America, our national cancer. And the crisis of the city is inextricably associated with race. Neither presidential candidate—in fact, no candidate of the Left or the Right in the last several elections—has made this great, gaping sore a major issue. In my view, this is a question of political priorities.

I cannot imagine not voting out of the belief that we can't do anything about the situation. That's nonsense. We made these cities, and we can unmake them. We can intervene. We can make changes and provide incentives. But we can do this only if we have the will to do so.

If you ask me what can we do about the extreme individualism in our culture, I don't think federal, state, or city governments can really do something about that condition. But that's not true about our cities. They are our great democratic failure. We as citizens have made pestholes of our cities.

Is it possible to promote public

policies that could foster an environment more conducive to caring?

I AM VERY LEERY of the idea that the state can lead people to caring. In a sense, that was the ethical basis of the experiment known as communism.

My own feeling is that modernized consumer societies inevitably produce people who are detached from each other. In that regard, the former Soviet Union and the United States were not too different. Both nations claimed to institutionalize functions which can only be performed by citizens and communities and neighbors. Both claimed to be great service societies.

The only difference is the question of who provides the services. Here in the United States, we don't like the idea of a social-welfare state—but we are red-hot on the idea of the commercial sector producing the substitute for care.

The Soviet Union had one way of diminishing citizenship; we have another. But both are predicated on the same idea: large institutions acting in lieu of local communities.

What kind of political action do you find most meaningful or hopeful?

INEXTRICABLY TIED to the re-creation of our society is the return of the political function to locality: friends, neighbors, associations, and community. The future of democracy depends on wresting control of politics from television, and inextricably with that, from money.

In my lifetime, I have seen politics move from a popular communal domain to an interaction between high-cost, television-packaged individuals. As long as that relationship exists, meaningful politics cannot be renewed. Television so dominates politics today that a candidate runs for office by getting money to buy television. That is an absolute revolution in politics.

Politics has to be personal, communal. It has to be about the dialogue of neighbors. The Greeks understood that politics required a forum. There is no

forum on television, no free discussion or range of opinion.

Often I am asked to appear on television programs. And I can say from my experience that everything there is a fix. A television show cannot allow a free discussion. Usually, two extreme opinions are offered and presented as though they represented something other than the extremes.

Television cannot afford the time to explore issues in depth. The one thing television cannot stand is the reality of human interaction—and human interaction is at the heart of real politics.

If I go to Canada, I can join a political party. Here, most people do not belong to a party. Where would you join one? You can find a *candidate's* office, but how do you join the party? We believe one can be a



"We are poor citizens. So we get poor politicians."

Democrat by watching the evening news and voting once a year.

One of the things that has struck me about the last couple elections is how people increasingly defame our elected officials. The reason for that is very clear: those officials represent us. We are, in general, poor citizens. So we get poor politicians. We get who we are.

Is it possible to get "poor citizens" reengaged as active participants in the political process?

THOSE IN THE Christian community who would be the vanguard of a politically reengaged citizenry should start by measuring the amount of time they spend in front of glass tubes—television and such monitors. That time ignores and even contradicts the purposes of community.

Then they should ask themselves how much of the meaning and expres-

sion of Christian faith depends upon relationships within the community.

Perhaps we should ask all modern Christians to live with the Amish for a year. Now, the limits of the Amish, in my mind, are that they have a boundary that is not welcoming. The Christian community must have a welcoming boundary. But there isn't much possibility of Christian life or community where life, space, and time are spent in relationship to a glass tube.

I try consciously to use that measure as much as I can: what part of my life is glass-eyed? That part, I consider, is a non-democratic, non-Christian life. It's not what's on it—it's what else I might be doing.

Computers are implicated as well?

ABSOLUTELY. Computers are the great lie. With television, you can't kid yourself that it is anything but a one-way medium. But computers give one the illusion of real interaction.

In Shakespearean times, when a play came to the local theater, everybody knew that the play was a play, not reality. Television is like that. But the

computer leads you to say, "Why don't you come up on stage?" It makes you think you are living there.

The computer is the great trickster. Once you succumb to the illusion that computer interaction is real, you are accessible to manipulation—which is why democracy is so threatened.

A few years ago, Robert Putnam wrote an influential article entitled "Bowling Alone," about the decline of associational life in our society. In his subsequent articles, Putnam has consistently attributed this to television. Associations are the hallmark of the democratic society in the United States—and they are disappearing.

What are the keys to reinvigorating associational life?

VAN ILICH, A PERSON of great insight and radical understanding, argues that in prior

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centuries, the average human being would be guided and shaped by the smells, sights, sounds, and touch of the environment. The senses were a primary tool for people's existence.

In our modern world, Illich would say, we have been unknowingly, unconsciously creating environments where the senses aren't needed. Paul Winter, who spends a lot of time around wild animals, says that these animals aren't "wild"—they simply have all their senses in play.

What we see in advanced societies is people with ever-diminished senses. And finally, with computers they can actually believe that as they sit in front of a glass eye, they have stepped onto the stage. They believe in a play where no real sense is needed. They don't need senses because they are now in illusion. They have entered through the looking glass into what Illich calls a *senseless* world. A world full of "non-sense".

The advance of community and democracy is mainly about the restoration of our senses: my ability to do with and for you. My ability to discern your uniqueness. To touch you. To actually know the odor of sanctity. To see inside your eyes. To hear the quiver in your voice.

When I enter the television or computer world, I leave my senses behind. I vote against community and against democracy.

Is it possible to wean people from "tube dependency" and get them involved in community life again?

STILL SEE MORE vitality in city neighborhoods than I see in most places. The reason is not the dignity of poverty—but the extremity of poverty. In the face of the literal manifest crisis, a lot of people are responding. People in the suburbs don't see the crisis. In most urban neighborhoods you find more people who are involved in vigorous community and political action than in the average suburb.

In the suburbs, more people drive

their kids to Little League. But I find the desire for a public struggle to define our common life much more characteristic of the people who face the crisis of the abandoned city than the people who don't.

If you could put together your own platform of the critical issues in this election, what would that platform be?

THERE ARE TWO issues that most people won't raise—so I'll raise them.

One: my political party would state as one of its campaign promises: "No more public money for human services." Instead, we support providing adequate income and a decent living wage for our people. All of our public wealth will be focused toward income—not low-income-focused services.

Understand that I distinguish between *general* services and *low-income* services. Every low-income service becomes a target of institutionalization.

I'm not saying we shouldn't have Medicare. I am saying we shouldn't have public housing. We shouldn't have welfare.

I'm not saying that we should have a de facto segregated public-employment program. I'm saying we have created in the public domain, in the name of human services, second-rate activities for poor people—so-called "benefits"—that mainly benefit the people who provide them.

The role of government is economic rather than service. This approach recognizes that the primary reason for low-income human services is victimization by the economic system.

Number two: my party would say that a good society is one where everybody contributes. Our primary value is to recognize that everybody has gifts, skills, and abilities. We need to create the vehicle that will allow those to be contributed. That means that everything that segregates or separates people in the name of service and help will be abolished.

One of the great lies of our society is that if you remove people to the world of service, you've helped them. In fact, you've hurt them, and you've

hurt the society. Our party's incentives, on the other hand, will be to pull people who have been labeled as marginal into the center of our society.

A society that values contributions is not based on either liberal or conservative values. The liberal value, it seems to me, institutionalizes pity and separation. The conservative value reifies individualism and separation. Liberals will put you in a mental institution, and the conservatives will put you on the street. The alternative is to say that everybody has a gift, and our task is to organize ourselves to see that each gift can be contributed to the whole.

Traditional societies and tribal societies understood this principle: for us to survive, we must find the contribution that each person can make and call it forth. They would not look on persons as liabilities; instead they would figure out what a one-legged man might do, or a woman with mental problems, or a child who didn't have a high IQ.

For our society to be strong, we need to have everybody contributing. We have developed two great methods to keep people from contributing: first, by removing them from society and exiling them to the world of "services;" and second, by removing them from society through the illusion of the glass eye, which literally disables them by making them believe the "play" is a substitute for real life.

That's the platform of my party—the Neighbor Party. **xxx**

JOHN MCKNIGHT'S books *THE CARELESS SOCIETY: COMMUNITY AND ITS COUNTERFEITS* (#492A, \$13.00) and *COMMUNITY BUILDING FROM THE INSIDE OUT* (#133A, \$15.00) (written with Jody Kreutzman) are available from *THE OTHER SIDE*. To order them, call 1-800-700-9280.

Artist **GUSTAVO LOPEZ AMENTIA** was born in Argentina. Working in both mediums of paint on canvas and steel sculpture, his art is rich with references to poverty, travel, religion, and city life. Gustavo has exhibited throughout Latin America and Europe, and is represented by the Reece Galleries in New York City.