

## The Voices of the People

Adam Davis

I say the mission of government, henceforth, in civilized lands, is ... to train communities through all their grades, beginning with individuals and ending there again, to rule themselves.

Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas"

And what would a new trust-generating citizenship look like?

Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers*

### WOLF

In some parts of Oregon – and other places throughout the United States – the word “wolf” is more dangerous than a real wolf. The word “gun” is almost as explosive as a real gun. The word “gentrification” is almost as disruptive as the phenomenon itself.

These words, and others I could list here, divide people, or they mark divides between people. When these words are spoken, people take sides. Differences of concern and perspective are inflamed; similarities and shared commitments get lost.

Where there might have been a people, a community, or a public – even if only implicit or thin – there suddenly appear to be groups set against one another. If you want to protect wolves, you’re not one of us. If you believe carrying a gun makes us safer, you make me unsafe. If you think the new coffee shop is a sign of progress rather than racism, you’re a racist yourself.

But, with some allowance for where you call home, wolves and guns and changing neighborhoods are a part of a shared conversation. The words stand for shared concerns, or shared challenges; our capacity to understand one another’s beliefs and feelings about these words and the issues they stand for is a big part of our capacity to constitute a community, a public, or a people together.

I learned that “wolf” is an explosive word when I led a community conversation at the Joseph Center in Enterprise, Oregon, and asked participants, at the beginning, to name something that they find difficult to talk about in their community. In Prineville, Oregon, my organization led a conversation about guns in America that revealed and may even have contributed to serious rifts in that community. And in Portland, my organization has been involved with too many contentious conversations about home ownership and race to count.

This essay is rooted in experiences like these.

#### SELF-RULE AND SELF-UNDERSTANDING

My two main goals in this essay are (1) to suggest that popular sovereignty or self-rule depends on self-understanding and (2) to point to a set of practices and activities that make this kind of popular self-understanding more likely, even or especially in a populace as vast, complex, and divided as that of the United States in 2020.

If we take seriously the idea that we, in aspirationally democratic communities, can rule ourselves, it would seem that we are also required to understand ourselves, or to try to – though the more diverse or complex a populace, the more challenging this endeavor to understand ourselves becomes. How can we, the people of the United States, at once complex and unified, understand ourselves? Even the word “we,” as I’m sloppily and presumptuously using it here, already points to and builds on this challenge, but I hope the slippery meaning of this word helps us focus on the question I’m most trying to explore: how can and should a complex and diverse populace express, hear, and come to understand itself?

Here at the outset, I want to suggest that self-rule and, along with it, self-understanding require us to express and listen to ourselves not only when we’re making decisions about representatives or policy but also in a wide variety of less formally political contexts. One rules oneself, as a community and as an individual, not only in moments of obvious and explicit decision-making but also in one’s habits and ongoing ways of being. Yet, few public or political communities create adequate conditions for self-understanding – for reflecting, with others, on their mutually constituted selves – and therefore for self-rule.

In a bit, I’ll point to some current efforts to do just this – to create conditions for people to reflect on their mutually constituted public selves. The efforts I’ll look at most closely are those I know through my own work as a facilitator of community discussions, trainer of discussion leaders, and director of two organizations that have worked to create and strengthen conditions for mutual understanding and, I believe, for self-governance. The on-the-ground efforts I’ll describe and argue for are a necessary and often overlooked complement to more formal civic education efforts like those that Andrew Perrin and Nicole Mellow experiment with and study, and to the kinds of useful top-down stories

Rogers Smith propounds.<sup>1</sup> They also complement legal and institutional efforts such as those that Carol Nackenoff analyzes.<sup>2</sup> I argue in this essay that self-rule, or popular sovereignty, needs all of these efforts – and my particular focus is on largely unrecognized and underfunded, dispersed, bottom-up efforts to create conditions for people in and from a wide range of contexts to talk with and listen to one another in order to build a more robust and recognizable public.

The perspective from which I write this essay is chiefly that of a practitioner rather than a theoretician or a researcher. Before turning to the practice, however, I want briefly to sketch some general theoretical context within which these on-the-ground efforts take place.

### WE THE PEOPLE

When we – the United States of America – constituted ourselves as a nation, our first word was “we.” What we meant by “we” came next: “the People of the United States.” This is a superficial but significant indication that, from the start, the United States of America has been devoted in word and principle, if not in practice, to the idea that the people ought to rule themselves – and that we are sufficiently united by geography, belief, or other factors to assign ourselves the name “the people.”

Our most respected president during our most trying and precarious national moment elaborated on and further inscribed this ideal of self-rule with the closing words of his Gettysburg address: “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from this earth.”

Yet, there are a wide range and a good number of reasons to doubt that, in the United States, the populace has been, is, or should be sovereign, should rule itself. To name only one example of this sort of skepticism, Walter Lippmann, nearly a century ago, argued in *The Phantom Public* that we ought to “abandon the notion that the people govern.”<sup>3</sup> Lippmann looks at everything from invariably poor voting turnout to generally deficient civic knowledge to the real, insider-driven machinery of democratic governance and concludes, “There is not the least reason for thinking, as mystical democrats have thought, that the compounding of individual ignorances in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs.”<sup>4</sup> Lippmann doesn’t believe the people do govern and he doesn’t think it would be desirable for the people to govern. The implication is that he likely doesn’t believe a unified, engaged, knowledgeable people exists, and he clearly doesn’t believe a self-governing people exists. At best, he suggests, the people should be interested and informed spectators rather than political actors themselves. There may come moments or crises

<sup>1</sup> Smith, Chapter 15, in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Nackenoff, Chapter 14, in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> Lippmann, *Phantom Public*, 61

<sup>4</sup> Lippmann, *Phantom Public*, 39.

when the people or the public should intervene, but only in the process or the selection of representatives and not, Lippmann emphasizes, to deal with the substance of the problem itself, whatever it may be. If we saw things more clearly, Lippmann suggests, we would see that the essence of popular government is to “support the Ins when things go well, the Outs when things go badly.”<sup>5</sup> It should be no surprise that the epigraph of *The Phantom Public* comes from Alexander Hamilton at the 1787 Federal Convention: “the voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact.”

Before continuing, I want to note the following two large and distinct questions implicit in Lippmann’s skepticism and Hamilton’s words. (1) Can there be a voice of the people? (2) Would it be possible or desirable for the people’s voice not only to express itself but also to rule or to govern the people – that is, itself? Another way to ask this second question is can and should the people be a “continuous directing force in public affairs”?

In what follows, I offer suggestions built on a combination of practical and theoretical efforts about what would be required in order to meet especially the first of these questions with an affirmative response.

#### THE PUBLIC AND ITS PROBLEMS

In 1927, two years after the appearance of Lippmann’s *The Phantom Public*, John Dewey published a set of lectures called *The Public and Its Problems*. I want to look at Dewey’s argument here for two reasons. First, the challenges to self-rule and self-understanding that Dewey identified in 1927 have grown only more comprehensive and pressing over the ensuing decades. Second, Dewey’s arguments about how a populace might move from society to community – or, in brief, from people living among each other to people living together – provide useful theoretical background for the on-the-ground efforts that the latter part of this essay will describe.

Much of what Dewey takes pains to illuminate can be detected in one short sentence from his third lecture, entitled “The Democratic State”: “The democratic public is still largely inchoate and unorganized.”<sup>6</sup> Here Dewey reveals a few important parts of what he’s seeing, beginning with the idea that the “democratic public” is one kind of association among many. This particular public association – the democratic public – emerges not only in response to older associations such as the Church but also in response to a revolt against those associations – the idea or myth of the free individual. So the democratic public, in Dewey’s view, is nascent, competing, and unformed, but it is “still,” to use Dewey’s word, where we seem to – or could, with care – be headed.

<sup>5</sup> Lippmann, *Phantom Public*, 199, 126.

<sup>6</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 109.

In addition to the challenges to the democratic public posed by older associations such as the Church and newer myths such as that of the free and independent individual, there are also a host of new forces that shape communities and publics in mostly undetectable ways. Dewey doesn't use the word "globalization," but it's clearly what he has in mind: "The invasion of the community by new and relatively impersonal and mechanical modes of combined human behavior is the outstanding fact of human life." He goes further: "the machine age has so enormously expanded, multiplied, intensified and complicated the scope of the indirect consequences ... that the resultant public cannot identify and distinguish itself [...] There are too many publics and too much of public concern for our existing resources to cope with."<sup>7</sup> Just as our individual lives are shaped by new, large, and complex forces we cannot see or control, even more do these forces shape our community and public lives. As a community, we cannot see clearly who we are or how we're shaped and formed.

On top of these mechanical and economic challenges to a democratically organized public coming to understand itself, Dewey also points to related and serious demographic challenges: "The notion of maintaining a unified state, even nominally self-governing, over a country as extended as the US and consisting of a large and racially diversified population, would once have seemed the wildest of fancies ... It seemed almost self-evident to Plato – as to Rousseau later – that a genuine state could hardly be larger than the number of persons capable of personal acquaintance with one another."<sup>8</sup> Because we're so large and diverse, it's very difficult to know what we share, and difficult to understand distant and apparently different others as part of one coherent national "people."

But here it's important to stress that Dewey is not pointing to the absence of a public: "It is not that there is no public, no large body of persons having a common interest in the consequences of social transactions." If, as Dewey says, a public is "a large body of persons having a common interest in the consequences of social transactions," then it turns out that "[t]here is too much public, a public too diffused and scattered and too intricate in composition. And there are too many publics, for conjoint actions which have indirect, serious and enduring consequences are multitudinous beyond comparison ...."<sup>9</sup> The problem is not no public but competing publics – some of them recognized and some of them opaque but forceful. How then, according to Dewey, can the democratic public emerge? How can we understand ourselves and act as a political community, as the nominally coherent "people" that some of the Framers and Lincoln had in mind?

For starters, according to Dewey, we must recognize ourselves as a people: "the prime difficulty ... is that of discovering a means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express

<sup>7</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 126.

<sup>8</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 114.

<sup>9</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 137.

its interests.”<sup>10</sup> If this sounds “mystical,” as Lippmann would have it, Dewey is only getting started. “Communication alone can create a great community. Our Babel is not one of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible.”<sup>11</sup> If “the outstanding problem of the Public is discovery and identification of itself,” then, according to Dewey, “the essential need ... is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion.”<sup>12</sup> What Dewey is suggesting, it turns out, is neither mystical nor farfetched. He’s suggesting that we talk and listen to one another, especially about the lives we have in common.

If what we’re after is healthy democracy, Dewey suggests, the problem seems to be that we don’t see ourselves as a *democratic* public. Instead we see ourselves as members of all sorts of other associations, groups, or tribes – and, at the same time, as independent individuals. The solution, according to Dewey, seems to be that we talk to each other about what sort of public we are or could be. What we need to move toward, in Dewey’s words, is “a society in which the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known in the full sense of that word, so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being.” Or, to put the same point differently, “when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication ... democracy will have its consummation.”<sup>13</sup>

I’m preparing to leave Dewey, Lippmann, and the 1920s behind, and to turn directly toward Oregon and the United States at the start of the 2020s. But before doing so, a few last words from Dewey – a bridge toward what some practitioners of democracy and dialogue call “bridging.”

Dewey argues that the best response to our scattered, mobile, and manifold situation is to revitalize the local, the nearby. “In its deepest and richest sense a community must always remain a matter of face-to-face intercourse ... Vital and thorough attachments are bred only in the intimacy of an intercourse which is of necessity restricted in range.”<sup>14</sup> When we’re thinking about democracy – and, for the purposes of this essay and this volume, about popular sovereignty, or self-rule – Dewey insists that we go local: “Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community.”<sup>15</sup> After identifying all the ways that the modern world complicates how we live together, Dewey offers this warning: “Unless local community life can be restored, the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself.”<sup>16</sup> To build our national democratic “we,” we have to focus first and maybe always on the local “we.”

<sup>10</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 146.

<sup>11</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 142.

<sup>12</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 185, 208.

<sup>13</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 184.

<sup>14</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 211.

<sup>15</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 213.

<sup>16</sup> Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 216.

## SO MANY PEOPLES

How, though, to restore community life? How to create conditions for mutual understanding and for the public to find and rule itself – given that all the contrary forces and tendencies Dewey and Lippmann enumerated just under a century ago have only intensified? From Bill Bishop’s *The Big Sort* to hundreds of other recent books, studies, articles, editorials, and polls, the dominant belief about “the people of the United States” seems to be that there is no self-consciously unified people to be found.<sup>17</sup> We are two peoples, three classes, seven tribes, or eleven regions. We are rural or urban, red or blue, Fox or MSNBC, white or black or brown, boomers or millennials or generation X, Y, or Z. We have college degrees or we don’t. We served in the military or we didn’t. We care about “justice” or we care about “freedom.” No matter who might say “We the People” today, many of us wouldn’t believe it – both because it (a coherent national people) doesn’t seem plausible and because we would distrust the person who says it, no matter what they’re saying. I don’t want to rehearse these ubiquitous analyses and lamentations here, but I do want to note that they bear on the question of self-rule in the following way: How can we talk about popular sovereignty in the absence of a unified people that would govern itself?

One first step – and a step that follows straight from Dewey’s diagnosis – is to name the problem and build off it. To restore or move toward a public, toward recognizing and governing ourselves, we would need to start by talking with neighbors about our community – and especially by listening to one another. In other words, we would need to embark on a project – or many projects – of mutual understanding and shared reflection.

That this sort of project may sound mystical, or crazy, attests to how oddly this particular experiment – the American experiment – in self-governance has gone. We seem not to believe that we can talk or listen to each other. We certainly don’t believe that we can govern ourselves for ourselves – at least not in any coherent, inclusive way.

## VOICES OF THE PEOPLE

Here are the names of four programs that my organization – Oregon Humanities – runs: the Conversation Project, Bridging Oregon, Dear Stranger, and Reflective Discussion Facilitation Training. We run these programs in partnership with public libraries, social service organizations, houses of worship, law firms, schools, municipal bodies, and numerous other outfits around the state. In doing so, we engage tens of thousands of Oregonians per year (and in some years, over a hundred thousand). Much of our work in these and other programs consists of creating conditions for people to talk with one another,

<sup>17</sup> Bishop, *The Big Sort*.

face-to-face, and across a range of differences, about matters of shared concern. We are a small nonprofit approaching our fiftieth year, and we are trying with increasing clarity and increasing reach to do what we believe to be the underlying work of democracy: to foster community-wide habits and practices of listening, reflecting, and understanding. We are trying to build a more connected and self-conscious public.

Our programs vary in format, content, and dosage, as well as in participants. Most programs are self-selecting, but some are obligatory (through the workplace). Some draw a majority of college-educated white people over the age of fifty, others draw people living at or near the poverty line who are more likely to come from a wider range of ethnic and racial backgrounds. The most difficult work is rarely what happens in the room; instead, it's the prework of building partnerships with communities and community organizations in order to convene diverse groups – and diverse in a number of ways.

The Conversation Project includes a changing menu of topics that any organization or community group can request. From “Crime and Punishment in Oregon” to “What We Want from the Wild” to “Faith and Politics” to “Race and Place: Racism and Resilience in Oregon’s Past and Future,” these fifty rotating Conversation Projects are designed to help people all around the state think about their community lives together and in doing so, to strengthen those community lives – to think about and shore up their public. If the Four Rivers Cultural Center in Ontario (fifty miles west of Boise, Idaho, just over the border into Oregon) requests “The Space Between Us: Immigrants, Refugees and Oregon,” we send out a trained discussion leader (who some months or years earlier proposed some version of that topic to us) to get that community talking.

Conversation Projects are one-off discussions open to whoever shows up, and they last for ninety minutes to two hours. Some organizations host loads of them and see a high percentage of repeat participants. Others host only one or two events and don't expect or see many repeat participants. What we hope for from these Conversation Projects is revealed by the evaluative questions we ask: Did you hear a new perspective? Did you talk with someone you hadn't talked with previously? Did you think differently about the topic? Do you feel more likely to take action in your community? Did you continue this discussion with anyone outside the room? What other topics do you think your community wants to discuss? We don't seek consensus or agreement with these programs; instead we're after mutual understanding of different perspectives, which can lead to increased trust, sparked during any single ninety-minute conversation and built over time.

The people who lead these Conversation Projects are community members themselves. They propose the topics, and we help them shape the discussion plans and become more skilled and confident facilitators. Our belief is that we're building civic infrastructure by elevating and training this growing corps of discussion leaders; they become important community resources, and they



see their role in community differently than they had prior to their experience of traveling around to get various groups of people talking and listening to each other. They also come to see themselves as part of a larger cohort and perhaps even a larger public.

Bridging Oregon is a higher-dosage program than the Conversation Project. For Bridging Oregon, we spend a few months reaching out to people and organizations from multiple towns in designated regions of the state to prepare for the gatherings. We then assemble groups of thirty people who gather for four half-day sessions over a two-month period to explore the divides in their region and how participants might work across them.

At the time of this writing, we had just completed a Bridging Oregon series in the Rogue Valley (Southwestern Oregon) that included participants from Medford, Grants Pass, Ashland, Klamath Falls, Williams, and other towns. As we assembled the group, we kept a strong eye on potential participants' access to power and worked to invite and include those who had been least likely to find themselves in rooms like this before.

Here are some of the comments about the program we heard from participants toward the end of the fourth half-day session:

- *It's helpful to start something really small. It gives me hope because I see people's hearts. It's a mirror put up to my face and it's different than me.*
- *I understand and I'm part of the community. I have more ease in working with my group and how to move forward. I'm calmer about what I have to do.*
- *I have more optimism about what we can do together.*
- *It was refreshing to be with people who are not my age, color, or religion.*
- *I'm appreciative that everyone has a way in.*
- *It has been a humbling and I'm still curious.*
- *I feel more able to see where potential for action exists.*
- *The divisions in this region are rough. I see that if no one else is going to do it I have to do it, period.*
- *I have a group that's actually listening to me here.*
- *This made me get a lot of power inside myself and I want to do something with a group of coworkers or whatever.*
- *I have greater awareness because I'm hearing it from your mouths.*
- *I have a little more hope for certain kinds of social change.*
- *I appreciate being in a room with people who seem like they give a fuck.*
- *I have more understanding of the value of time together. A change happens with time together.*
- *I have a greater sense of accountability and responsibility.*
- *This is helping me reconnect with my broader community.*
- *I have more clarity around the complicated concept of diversity.*
- *I have more readiness to start an uncertain project.*
- *I am seeing this group and our valley differently.*

- *I have been able to hear the voice of the North end of the Valley. Neil, Jesse, Fox – I hear you. I got you.*
- *I am moving away from distrust of others as a first instinct.*
- *We can afford ourselves the same courtesy we afford other people.*
- *I feel able to really hear other people, to get a peek into people and to get more understanding.*
- *This fanned the flame of curiosity about people and race.*
- *I have the feeling of having more roots.*
- *I am feeling courage and encouragement to build a community group.*
- *Yes, pat yourself on the back, but keep working.*
- *Please reach out to me.*

These comments come from a man who works in a cannabis shop, a woman who works at McDonald's, a man who works as an administrator at a college, a woman who retired with her husband to a senior facility in the region and then lost her husband, a high-school teacher, a former pastor, a photographer, a hospitality professional, a few people who are patching multiple part-time jobs together, and others. One of the discussion leaders is a priest. The other runs a start-up nonprofit and teaches.

Bridging Oregon, like the Conversation Project, is not principally geared toward information delivery or toward agreement or consensus. Both programs are designed to build connections, ensure that people hear perspectives other than their own, reconsider their own beliefs and commitments, and feel a stronger sense of agency in their communities.

Dear Stranger is a much lower-dosage program than either the Conversation Project or Bridging Oregon; it's an invitation to write a letter to someone you don't know. Our organization offers a prompt – for example, describe something about your community that people who don't live there might find surprising – and then, when we receive letters, we swap them with letters from writers in other parts of the state. Sometimes people exchange only one letter each; sometimes they keep writing to each other and go on to visit and develop enduring relationships. In addition to the people who participate in this letter exchange, we've seen this program get a lot of attention from media outlets around the state. The idea that people might connect across regions and perspectives seems to strike a chord. This is an inexpensive, easily accessible step toward building a stronger public.

Here I should pause to note that with Dear Stranger, as with the Conversation Project and Bridging Oregon and all our programs, inviting people to share views across differences of background and belief sometimes leads to tension or outright conflict. In some instances, the moments of tension are the most important and productive parts of the experience. In other instances, the moments of tension break into outright conflict and do some damage to the trust we're hoping to build. What we've tried to do in instances like these is keep an eye on the horizon for this work; one conflict-ridden ninety-minute conversation can turn

out to be a good opportunity for a community to make an effort to address and work through underlying conflicts, which may take years.

The Prineville conversation about guns in America that I referred to at the start of this essay was an example of this. The conversation was full of conflict. Several people left partway through. Multiple people wrote letters to the local paper. The library that hosted the event was shaken by their role in all of it. But the library and many other local parties responded to this one incident by redoubling their commitment to talking about difficult community issues, and that library in Prineville chose, three years later, to host our first four-session Bridging Oregon series, which was, in many ways, a palpable success.

Oregon Humanities also trains groups of people to lead reflective discussions in their communities and workplaces. We provide this training around Oregon and around the country. The basic format of these trainings is fairly straightforward: Over a two-day period, we facilitate and model a discussion (about, say, difference and connection, or freedom and self-expression, or what we hope for when we intervene in others' lives), talk together about what was valuable about that activity, and then move participants into planning and leading their own smaller group discussions with one another. We try to provide participants with tools that they can soon put to use in convening and leading conversations – and along the way, we get people talking and listening with one another and thinking more about the communities in which they live. We create conditions for participants to experience a public, and we prepare them to shape similar experiences for other people in their communities after the “training” ends.

Is this the kind of training Whitman had in mind when he wrote that “the mission of government” is “to train communities through all their grades, beginning with individuals and ending there again, to rule themselves”? Briefly, I would argue that this training, provided by a nongovernmental organization, provides part (and a small amount) of what self-rule requires. It provides opportunities for people to talk with and listen to each other, to ask shared questions and engage in shared reflection, and to develop skills and confidence in doing similar work going forward. This training and the other three programs I've mentioned pursue necessary but not yet fully sufficient conditions for a diverse people to recognize and understand and even rule itself. Without the sort of mutual recognition and understanding that programs like these deliberately pursue and contribute to, I believe the prospects for self-rule are dim.

Yet, it's also worth saying that none of these four programs (or any others that we run) are partisan or political in the way the word is usually used. Instead the activities are political in an older sense of the word. They are the kinds of activities that, as Aristotle would have it, can only happen in the polis, where individuals have the opportunity to talk with each other about the advantages and the disadvantages, the good and the bad, the just and the unjust.<sup>18</sup> They are

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a7.

programs that encourage us to talk about the public we comprise together, and in doing so, to build – to constitute – that public.

These conversations and exchanges of stories are driven by open-ended questions that everyone can respond to. The shaping and scaffolding of these questions is one of the ways we try with all of our programs to ensure that everyone feels welcome. There is a public, we try to suggest, and you are part of it. When there are choices to be made – and there are always choices to be made – we try to tilt our outreach, facilitate recruitment, partner development, and program design toward those who haven't always felt welcome or included in the past.

I believe this is necessary work – necessary because our communities need it and necessary because our democracy depends on it. It is thoroughly public work, though the questions often begin in personal experience and the conversations are not primarily intended to move people toward voting or to take the measure of their attitudes or beliefs. We assume that people are fluid rather than fixed, that they are thoughtful, that they want to listen and be listened to. We are more committed to engaging participants with one another than to extracting information from them or delivering information to them.

We know that this is slow work and that the horizon is far off: “the long haul,” as Myles Horton would have it. We are sometimes encouraged by people who know or hear about this work to do it with leaders, influencers, and officeholders, but thus far we have chosen not to focus specifically on those in power. Sometimes officeholders are involved in these conversations, but more often they are not. We're more interested in the long work of self-rule than in the prospect of working with those who rule right now.

#### UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES

I've tried to suggest and begin to show that self-rule must begin before and extend beyond governing and voting, that it only makes sense for we the people to rule ourselves if (a) we recognize ourselves as a people and (b) we are able to engage in ongoing, inclusive efforts to understand who we are, who we would like to be, and what we share. To rule ourselves, we need to know ourselves. And to know ourselves, we must engage in ongoing efforts to understand one another and what we share.

If this particular people were not so diverse and spread out, or if there were more broadly shared experiences and activities, or if we put a large share of trust in certain national institutions or figures, then we might not need to find ways to foster habits and practices of understanding ourselves. But this populace is remarkably diverse in a number of ways and increasingly wary of large institutions. Without broadly shared history or belief, without shared sacrifice or service, without a shared sense of threat or opportunity, and without even a broadly shared story of identity, of who we are, the ideal of popular sovereignty, of people governing themselves, depends on practical, ground-level, long-term efforts to build connections and a shared sense of a democratic public.

In an essay written toward the end of his life, Dewey asserts that “we now have to re-create by deliberate and determined endeavor the kind of democracy which in its origin one hundred and fifty years ago was largely the product of a fortunate combination of men and circumstances.” Dewey in 1940 was responding to a smaller set of barriers to self-rule than those that have developed since, but his concluding exhortation still holds: “It is a challenge to do for the critical and complex conditions of today what the men of an earlier day did for simpler conditions.”<sup>19</sup>

I have touched briefly on these four programs that Oregon Humanities runs because I believe they are examples of the “deliberate and determined endeavor” Dewey had in mind and because these are efforts that I know well from personal and professional experience. But there are many more initiatives and programs devoted to similar goals than I could possibly name here. There are, for example, state humanities councils in every state and territory. Most if not all of these councils are devoted to the kinds of goals Oregon Humanities pursues – to getting people talking, listening, connecting, and reflecting. There is also a Federation of State Humanities Councils – a network that makes it easier for councils to learn from one another and amplify the impact and visibility of their work. There are other national efforts such as the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation and the National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement (led by the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions). There are state-level efforts including, in my own Pacific Northwest state, those run by Healthy Democracy, Oregon’s Kitchen Table, and Oregon Community Foundation’s Latino Partnership Program. There are regional and local efforts such as City Clubs, The Hearth (in Southern Oregon), and the High Desert Partnership (based in Harney County, where High Desert Partnership collaborative efforts helped community members respond as the Bundy brothers instigated an armed standoff over management of public lands). There are municipal agencies such as the City of Portland’s recently renamed Office of Civic and Community Life and the conversation-minded City of Woodburn, which has hosted numerous Oregon Humanities Conversation Projects to help residents connect with one another across differences of background and belief. And there are foundations like the Whitman Institute, Meyer Memorial Trust (especially their Building Communities division), the Kettering Foundation, and the Kellogg Foundation as well as coalitions of funders like PACE (Philanthropy Active in Civic Engagement). Again, there are many more local, regional, and national efforts and organizations than I could possibly list or even know about.

But even with all these efforts across various levels and sectors, we fall a good bit short of a clearly identified field, and a good bit short of the impact that such a clearly constituted field might have. And aside from incipient efforts at participatory budgeting and well-advertised but far-from-conversational “town hall meetings,” the most obvious engine for this kind of activity – government

<sup>19</sup> Dewey, “Creative Democracy,” 225.

itself – is rarely in the business of helping people talk with, listen to, and understand one another. Instead government tends to function more as decider than convener, and often the reasons for its decisions are deliberately oblique, somehow beyond the reach of dialogue. Government itself is not trusted, and its operations rarely demonstrate commitment to creating conditions for people – civilians – to understand and trust each other.

#### TRUST AND SELF-RULE

If the government of the United States, for one, does not appear to be in the business of training communities to understand and rule themselves, then, I would argue, communities and community organizations have to be the engine of self-government. Their work must begin with and steadily point toward the goal of creating conditions in which diverse peoples can see one another and themselves as sufficiently unified and connected to recognize themselves as a coherent democratic public.

I started this essay with two short quotations. The first was Walt Whitman's call for government to train communities to rule themselves. Whitman was a poet, not an officeholder or even a political philosopher. He was also a volunteer nurse in military hospitals during the war that elicited from President Lincoln the formulation of "government of the people, by the people, for the people." And in the same book – *Democratic Vistas* – that includes Whitman's call for government to train communities to rule themselves, he also asked the following question: "Did you, too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name?"<sup>20</sup> Whitman's political imagining begins and ends not with government but with the people. He lays out a vision of individuals and communities ruling themselves, and he recognizes, with Dewey and against Lippman, that people of all origins and occupations ought to be and can be involved in the project of self-rule. "The purpose of democracy ..." Whitman writes, is "to illustrate, at all hazards, this doctrine or theory that man, properly train'd in sanest, highest freedom, may and must become a law, and series of laws, unto himself."<sup>21</sup> And Whitman recognizes that the best hope of getting there is not finally or fundamentally through institutions or electoral processes but through "comradship" – without which democracy "will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself."<sup>22</sup>

Here Whitman prefigures Dewey, who writes I am inclined to believe that the heart and final guarantee of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbors on the street corner to discuss back and forth what is read in uncensored news of the day, and in gatherings of friends in the living rooms of houses and

<sup>20</sup> Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 956.

<sup>21</sup> Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 942.

<sup>22</sup> Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 982.

apartments to converse freely with one another.”<sup>23</sup> Dewey, like Whitman, understands that the prospect of self-rule depends on much more than our political framework. “Merely legal guarantees of the civil liberties of free belief, free expression, free assembly are of little avail if in daily life freedom of communication, the give and take of ideas, facts, experiences, is choked by mutual suspicion, by abuse, by fear and hatred.”<sup>24</sup> Where and how does this happen, this “give and take of ideas, facts, and experiences”? What are the barriers to it and how can we reduce those barriers?

If Whitman’s vision of comradeship and Dewey’s vision of friendship can sound strangely optimistic or even hallucinatory today for many of the reasons I’ve mentioned – chiefly the size and scale of the country and the divisions and differences it seems to contain – I want to stress that neither Whitman nor Dewey looked away from the “canker’d, crude, suspicious, and rotten” parts of the aspirationally democratic society that both had great hopes for.<sup>25</sup> Second, I want to turn to and conclude with a contemporary thinker, Danielle Allen, who makes simultaneously sober and hopeful arguments about how, in service to the ideals of democracy, we might relate to and understand one another and thereby rule ourselves.

The second quotation I started this essay with – “And what would a new trust-generating citizenship look like?” – comes from Danielle Allen’s 2004 book *Talking to Strangers*. In *Talking to Strangers*, Allen, like Whitman and Dewey, makes a case for what she describes as “forms of citizenship that, when coupled with liberal institutions, [can dissolve distrust].”<sup>26</sup> In other words, Allen believes that how we relate to one another is determinative for our capacity to rule ourselves, or that, as Dewey puts it, “the heart and guarantee of democracy” resides at least as much in how we the people are with each other as in our laws and institutions. And Allen locates trust – and distrust – at the center of this endeavor.

As I bring this paper toward its conclusion, I want to highlight what I take to be the central point of Allen’s argument: Self-rule is only possible under conditions in which the people that would rule itself develops certain “muscular” habits – specifically habits of “trust production.” Distrust, in other words, is the core challenge. And it “can be overcome only when citizens manage to find methods of generating mutual benefit despite differences of position, experience, and perspective.”<sup>27</sup> The habits and methods Allen has in mind exceed the merely legal or institutional though they depend on legal and institutional frameworks in order to develop and flourish. They are habits and methods of building what Allen, echoing Whitman and Dewey, calls “political friendship.” They are habits and methods of talking – and listening – to strangers.

<sup>23</sup> Dewey, “Creative Democracy,” 227.

<sup>24</sup> Dewey, “Creative Democracy,” 228.

<sup>25</sup> Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” 937.

<sup>26</sup> Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, xx.

<sup>27</sup> Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, xix.

There is nothing complicated about what Allen means by political friendship – or about what Whitman means by comradeship and Dewey means by friendship. All three of these thinkers recognize that for a people to rule itself, we must be able to understand and connect to one another across inevitable and often valuable if painful differences and divides. In Dewey's words, "To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life."<sup>28</sup>

Allen goes further than Dewey in that she explicitly brings sacrifice and loss into the array of differences that must be reckoned with. "Citizenship is not, fundamentally, a matter of institutional duties but of how one learns to negotiate loss and reciprocity."<sup>29</sup> When Allen talks about negotiating loss, she has in mind the most significant kinds of loss one can imagine: loss of safety, loss of the sense of self, loss of sovereignty. Democracy, Allen suggest, demands that its people aspire to be sovereign yet regularly undermines "each citizen's experience" of sovereignty.<sup>30</sup> "As a result," Allen writes, "democratic citizenship requires rituals to manage the psychological tension that arises from being a nearly powerless sovereign."<sup>31</sup> It is precisely because loss, distrust, and the sense of powerlessness are inevitable parts of the attempt to rule ourselves that habits of trust production need to be cultivated.

A moment ago I asserted that there is nothing complicated about what Allen, Whitman, and Dewey mean by comradeship and friendship. Here I want to assert that what's complicated – and difficult – and necessary – is to commit deeply to the habits and practices that produce and sustain comradeship and friendship and to continue to recognize the inextricable relationship between these habits and practices and the audacious project of self-rule.

As a last word, I want to bring back the three inflammatory words I mentioned at the start of the essay and then conclude with three voices from the 2019 Bridging Oregon series in the Rogue Valley:

*Wolf. Guns. Gentrification.*

And:

*I have more understanding of the value of time together. A change happens with time together.*

*I have been able to hear the voice of the North end of the Valley. Neil, Jesse, Fox – I hear you. I got you.*

*I am moving away from distrust of others as a first instinct.*

<sup>28</sup> Dewey, "Creative Democracy," 228.

<sup>29</sup> Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 165.

<sup>30</sup> Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 41.