

John Brandl

&

His Uncommon Quest for Common Ground



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CELEBRATING
**JOHN
BRANDL**
& HIS
UNCOMMON
QUEST FOR
COMMON GROUND

Wednesday, January 28, 2009

4-5:30 p.m.

Reception to follow

Humphrey Center
301 – 19th Ave. S.
Minneapolis

Please join six of Minnesota's strangest bedfellows as they talk about government's proper role in the currently troubled economy in the ecumenical spirit of a remarkable scholar, public servant, and friend.

This will be the first of an annual gathering in celebration of the late Professor Brandl's rich and generous life in which speakers, for one day anyway, seek to bridge differences by civilly ushering away – both Stage Right and Stage Left – disagreements that may be more assumed than central.

Pat Anderson

*Minnesota Free
Market Institute*

Matt Entenza

Minnesota 2020

Sean Kershaw

Citizens League

Mitch Pearlstein

Center of the American Experiment

Dane Smith

Growth & Justice

Moderated by

J. Brian Atwood

*Hubert H. Humphrey Institute
of Public Affairs*

The event is free and open to the public, but registration is appreciated. To RSVP, simply [reply to this email invitation](#) with your name(s) and phone number(s), or call **612-338-3605**. For parking and directions, visit www.hhh.umn.edu.

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Sponsored by the Caux Round Table, Center of the American Experiment, Citizens League, Growth & Justice, Minnesota Free Market Institute, and Minnesota 2020. We thank the Humphrey Institute, Professor's Brandl's long-time academic home, for its hospitality.

The first Brandl Program Invitation

Introduction

by

Mitch Pearlstein

Fifteen years ago, Minnesotans were invited to the first of what promised to be an annual program in honor of a great friend who had died the previous summer. It went by the name “Celebrating John Brandl & His Uncommon Quest for Common Ground,” as it still does.

For the inaugural panel, announcements spoke of how several of “Minnesota’s strangest bedfellows” pledged to discuss contentious issues – *out in the open where there was no hiding* – in the “ecumenical spirit of a remarkable scholar, public servant, and friend.” For “one day anyway,” they would seek to civilly bridge differences whose severity, in some instances, might be more assumed than real.

Fifteen years later, during a particularly roiling time in our state and nation’s history, we’re still at it, this time asking eight eclectic writers to consider the vital question, “Do You Think John Brandl’s Brand of Civility and Ecumenicism is Still Possible?” Their ultra-condensed answer? “Maybe yes . . . but only if.”

Below are slices of what the eight argue, including myself. They include one by my longtime colleague in this and other ventures, Steve Young, lead insister and motivator in pulling in this collection together.

“To be sure, Brandl always seemed to be wired to be a searcher for the common good. Raised as an out-stater (St. Cloud) and yet a Minneapolitan by choice, Brandl was a good Democrat when it was possible for good Democrats (and good Republicans) to take both liberal and conservative positions. It was also a time – at least in Brandl’s case – when a good DFLer could draft, endorse, promote, and secure passage of legislation that angered DFL allies.”

John C. “Chuck” Chalberg

“We were all stunned. It was clear these two men shared a core value system underneath their strong policy differences about the role of government. When asked at the end of the workshop what people were taking with them, one of the participants said, “You can’t fight someone in the same way when you know their heart.”

William J. Doherty

“If in this environment of mistrust, anger, and fear the John Brandl-style of civility and ecumenicism is to find new life, it won’t be from top down. It will be a grassroots movement that demands that each of us contributes to meaningful outcomes. Civility isn’t simply the absence of animus; it is the means to achieving solutions that are embraced broadly.”

Tom Horner

“A core component of my world view is that my neighbor is just as much God’s image-bearer as I am, and thus deserves to be loved as much as I want to be loved and respected. You may prefer to look for the divine spark in others or revel in notions of human equality, but *something* has to anchor civility when it is pushed to the limit.”

Bob Osburn

“The late John Brandl was the antithesis of Donald Trump and there can be no doubt that he would be aghast at Trump’s shredding of the social contract and norms of civil discourse. He would probably be charitable in trying to understand the motivations and legitimate concerns of the millions of MAGA zealots.”

Dane Smith

“Ask whether John Brandl’s civility and political ecumenicism are still possible 16 years after his death, and I wonder first about what has happened to relationships in American civic life. It’s been in vogue to encourage Americans to hate each other. Too few have condemned that approach to public life with the term it deserves. It’s anti-American.”

Lori Sturdevant

“The test of justice is not fidelity to ‘my’ truth or ‘your’ truth but whether it provides an outcome that is more transcendent than the prejudiced preferences and perceptions of just anybody. That search is fiduciary responsibility in action; the taking of due care of others in mind and heart. As Pope Francis, who shares John’s faith, reminded us in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, it is the dignity of the Samaritan who came to the aid of a stranger in an act creating a common good of trust, care, and confidence in one another.”

Stephen B. Young

And slice of mine.

“For some offbeat reason this symposium got me thinking about ‘The Life of Reilly,’ a TV sitcom from the 1950s in which William Bendix ended every episode – when something went screwy, as it always did – by saying in a pained voice, ‘What a revolting development this is!’ Jumping 60-plus years ahead, how to make progress against the decidedly unfunny, revolting situation bedeviling us now? Other writers in this collection urge a range of ideas and proposals, none of which I have any problem with, quite the opposite. So, in the interest of variety, here once more is quintessentially Al Quie, with more of a prayer and imploration.”

Mitch Pearlstein

Questions? Disagreements? Other comments? You can reach me at mitch.pearlstein@americanexperiment.org. Steve Young is at steve@cauxroundtable.net. Great thanks, especially to Patrick Rhone for his beautiful design work.

April 2024

“The Common Goodness of Non-Governmental Initiatives and Activities”

by

John C. “Chuck” Chalberg

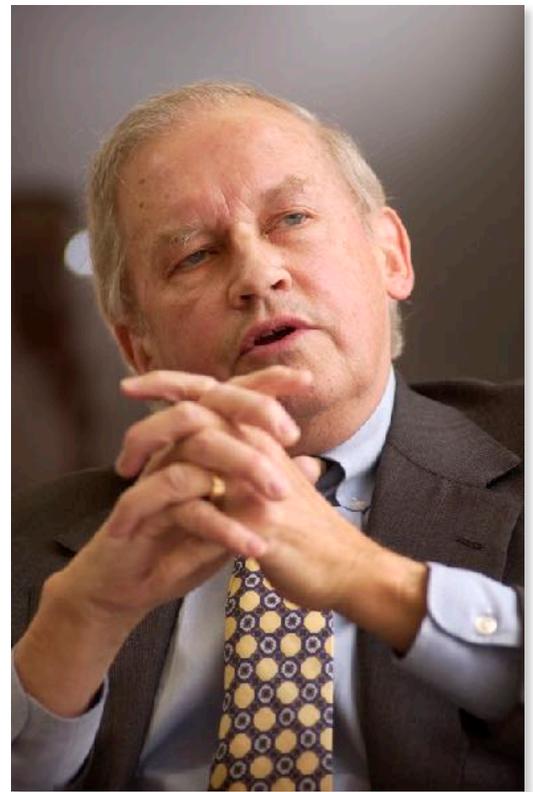
In 1994 John Brandl sat down for a lengthy interview conducted by retired University of Minnesota professor of history, Clark Chambers. Then in his late fifties, ex-state senator Brandl was asked to reflect on his multiple careers in government, politics and education. The overriding mood was one of melancholy. In fact, that very word appears more than once in the transcript.

Not that Brandl was ready to throw in the towel in his search for the common good. In many ways, that search – especially his own laser-like focus on it – may have been only in its early stages at this semi-late stage of his very active public life.

What is certain is that Brandl, having retired from elective office a few years earlier, was not remotely interested in retiring from dealing with public policy issues and concerns. And as of 1994 he was concerned, very concerned.

Even then, some very big and important institutions were not working as well as he thought they should be working, meaning government in general and the University of Minnesota in particular. At least in his knowledgeable opinion this was the case. And even then Brandl was noticing that the public was beginning to notice the same thing. The university specifically seemed to be held in noticeably declining esteem – and not simply because its football team was somewhere in the midst of something between a semi-permanent and permanent drought.

To be sure, Brandl always seemed to be wired to be a searcher for the common good. Raised as an out-stater (St. Cloud) and yet a Minneapolitan by choice, Brandl was a good Democrat when it was possible for good Democrats (and good Republicans) to take both liberal and conservative positions. It was also a time – at least in Brandl’s case – when a good DFLer could draft, endorse, promote, and secure passage of legislation that angered key DFL allies.



John Brandl

That stipulated, something else may well have been lurking somewhere in the back of Brandl's mind. Having come of political age at a time when it was axiomatic to presume that public servants were proponents of the common good, Brandl might have had very good reason to begin to doubt – or at least question – the validity of that presumption.

The issue that Chambers and Brandl dwell on in this interview concerned the latter's role in shepherding into law in the early 1980s a bill to extend financial aid directly to students attending private colleges in Minnesota. Brandl told Chambers that he had believed “for some time” that more of such aid should go directly to students and “less to institutions.”

He conceded that this was a “very, very controversial point.” But he proceeded to promote such legislation, both because the economist in him told him that “empowering consumers” made sense and because of his own positive experience as a student at St. John's University in Collegeville.

In other (Brandl) words, “meeting public purposes through institutions that are other than public institutions sometimes can make sense.” Not quite finished, Brandl went on to declare that higher education was “flourishing” in America “in part because it isn't exclusively public; it isn't a monopoly.”

Brandl concluded this segment of the interview by stating that this change in the law was at least a “partial explanation for why higher education . . . was in better shape than primary and secondary” education.

Brandl then began to reflect on the importance of packaging one's ideas in ways that “will be persuasive” not just to other legislators, but to the public at large. It was his view that it was both “appropriate” and “fitting” that students should be able to apply their aid to a private college “if they wanted to.”

But would that view alone be sufficient to convince a majority of legislators? Brandl didn't think so. His more “practical point” was that, lacking such aid, students would opt for public colleges, thereby driving up state expenditures for higher education.

In the end he prevailed on this “very, very controversial point” even though he was “fought bitterly by the unions.” In a very real sense he was also making a very practical common good argument here as well. Or at least he had the makings of such an argument. In fact, not just here, but in the entire interview, Brandl's stress on the importance of competition and, yes, diversity (of options and choices among institutions) certainly has common good implications not just in education, but in other areas as well

But let's stay with education just a bit longer. Today a similarly "very, very controversial" case (to borrow from Brandl) now needs to be made for extending aid directly to families seeking educational alternatives on the primary and secondary levels of education in Minnesota. Once again, the importance of competition and diversity must be highlighted. Once again, a practical economic argument could be made as well. But a common good argument should be an important part of the mix.

In all likelihood, such a case will be fought even more bitterly today, and yet it can and must be made. More than that, the essence of the practical Brandl approach could still apply. In truth, it *should* still apply. But at the heart of the argument should be an overt, rather than veiled, appeal to the common good.

Brandl more than hinted at the essence of such an argument later in the same interview. At issue was Brandl's insistence on the continuing relevance of the ideas and commentary of Alexis de Tocqueville for America at the end of the 20th Century. One Tocquevillian insight in particular remained especially relevant for Brandl as the 21st Century loomed. That would be the importance of vibrant, local "associations" to the success of the American experiment. Brandl's preferred label was the role that "mediating institutions" of all sorts played by way of contributing to the betterment of American life.



Alexis de Tocqueville

If Tocqueville was struck by the importance of those institutions in the early 19th century, Brandl was struck by their decline in his America. More than that, he was troubled by the role that not just government in general played in this, but the specific role that his "own political party" seemed to be playing by way of contributing to this decline.

Brandl was surely right to note that Tocqueville "celebrated and marveled" at the associations, both religious and secular, that he found here. Brandl was also right to note that such associations of "family and religion" were now much, much weaker.

Why is this so? In answering his own question he concluded that "to some extent they are weaker because government has been indifferent or hostile or clumsy in the way it's dealt with them"

To be sure, other factors have played a role as well. But Brandl was surely on the mark in noting the negative role that government has sometimes played. He was also right to recognize the common goodness of non-governmental initiatives and activities.

To assume that only public entities have the common good in mind was never a mistake that John Brandl made. In fact, it may well be a mistake to presume that public entities always have had the common good primarily in mind.

In any case, there should be plenty of room and reason to make a case that could even out-Brandl's John Brandl when it comes to common good advocacy. Such a case could simultaneously lay bare the less-than-common-good dimensions of public entities *and* lay out the benefits to the common good for maintaining and strengthening private institutions.

No doubt there will be plenty of hostility directed at a Brandl-like case for direct aid to families for their children to attend non-public primary and secondary schools in Minnesota. But a common good argument surely ought to be made to do just that, especially if it is made in this context: we are all in this together as Minnesotans and Americans.

John Brandl's old party, the current DFL, seems intent on dividing us into various tribes, as well into categories of winners and losers, the oppressors and the oppressed, the privileged and the unprivileged, not to mention politicizing so much of what passes for education at the primary and secondary levels.

This is all the more reason to strengthen and enhance the John Brandl approach to public policy. Brandl himself may only have been in the early stages of building up a head of steam for his "common good" approach. If so, it would surely be a mistake to abandon his approach now.

John C. "Chuck" Chalberg writes from Bloomington.

“You Can’t Fight Someone in the Same Way When You Know Their Heart”

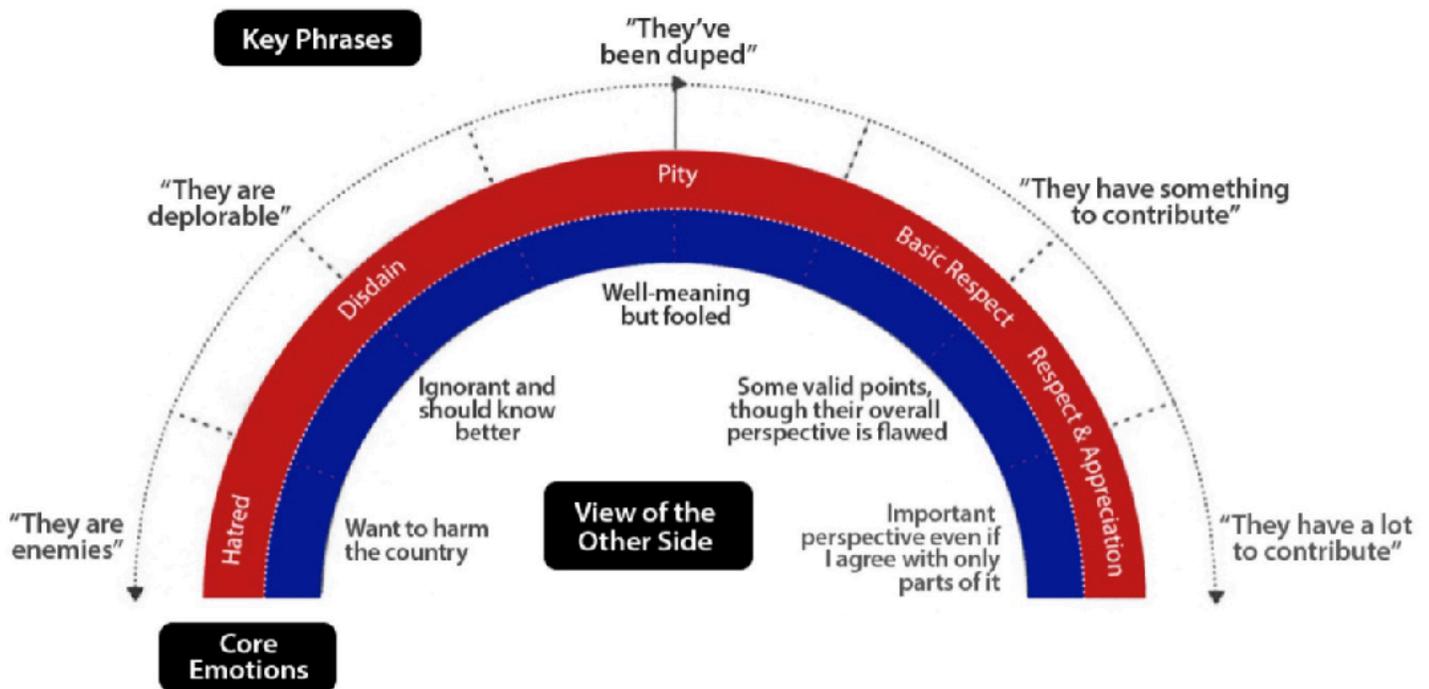
by

William J. Doherty

Do I think John Brandl’s “brand of civility and ecumenicism is still possible?” My short answer is “yes,” but it’s an uphill climb.

Our public life, from local schools to cities, towns, state legislatures and Congress, has become increasingly polarized, resulting in paralysis in public policy and divisiveness in our communities and even our families. Political scientists call this “affective polarization,” which is how we regard one another across political differences – with disrespect, disdain, and even hostility based on who we vote for and our views on hot button issues.

I developed the figure below for [Braver Angels](#), a nonprofit working to bridge the polarization gap in this country. It depicts a continuum of attitudes where John Brandl would be on the right-hand side and the most polarized people would be on the left. Helping people move along this continuum (when they are open to it) gets them closer to the John Brandl mindset. It’s the work of Braver Angels, and I’ve seen it in action.



The Emotional and Intellectual Transformation of De-Polarization

We have academic studies showing that Braver Angels workshops help participants change their mindsets about people on the other political side, but I'd like to share a story from a workshop with state legislators in a state other than Minnesota. The activity called for each person in a group equally divided into Republicans and Democrats (some of whom were considered divisive characters by their peers) to take five minutes to answer this question: "What life experiences have influenced your values and beliefs about public policy and public service?" Everyone just listened as we went around the group.

One Democrat told a powerful story of growing up in the foster care system after the breakup of his troubled family, a searing experience that propelled him into public service and politics to make a difference for children like him and his siblings. He no sooner finished when a Republican blurted out, "Oh my God, I'm don't believe this: I grew up in foster care too." He told his story and his efforts to make a difference not through government programs (which he did not trust very much) but through the voluntary and civic realm, religious congregations, and labor unions that taught job skills to young people.

We were all stunned. It was clear that these two men shared a core value system underneath their strong policy differences about the role of government. When asked at the end of the workshop what people were taking with them, one of the participants said, "You can't fight someone in the same way when you know their heart."

John Brandl did not confuse policies with hearts, which allowed him to relate across divides in a seemingly effortless way. The climb may be steeper for us now, but is it possible indeed, and necessary.

William J. Doherty is Professor of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota and co-founder of Braver Angels.

“Willingness to be Public in the Endorsement of Civility”

by

Tom Horner

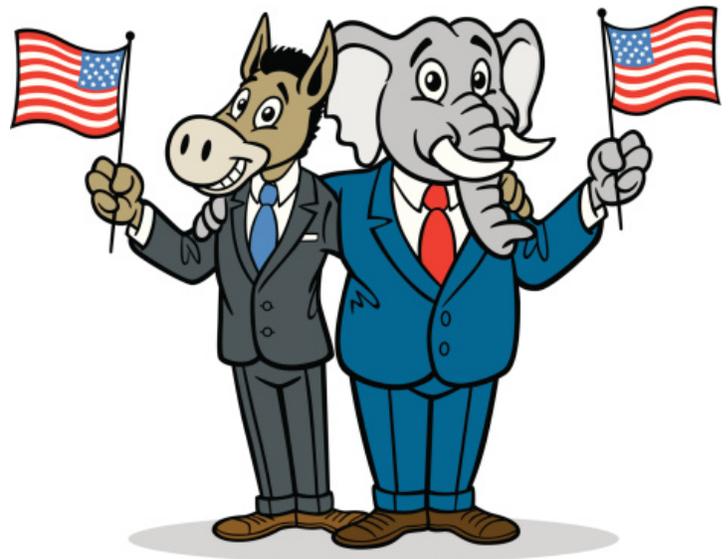
The deep chasms that separate so many today by partisan politics, income, race, and other characteristics sometimes seem as if they are too great to cross. Walter Mondale and Dave Durenberger shared the dais some years ago to discuss what was different between the politics of their time in office and today. On one point, they emphatically agreed: Policymakers today no longer can even agree on defining the problem. That makes it impossible to find solutions.

Consider two of the defining issues of the 2024 campaigns, abortion, and immigration. On the former, Republicans frame the issue almost exclusively as the right of the unborn child to life. Democrats see the issue through the lens of a woman’s reproductive health. Immigration? For Republicans, the issue is border security. Democrats speak to the humanity of those crossing the border and those undocumented immigrants already in the country.

And so it goes. Conversations that fail to resonate across the aisle because they go right past the listener.

If, in this environment of mistrust, anger, and fear the John Brandl-style of civility and ecumenism is to find new life, it won’t be from the top down. It will be a grassroots movement that demands that each of us contributes to meaningful outcomes. Civility isn’t simply the absence of animus; it is the means to achieving solutions that are embraced broadly.

The revival of Brandl’s style of engagement will require more than an openness to compromise. At best, compromise leads us to the least objectionable solution. Instead, proactive civility and ecumenism seek collaboration. It is collaboration that forges a true partnership, one that requires the parties to listen to each other and to find the solutions that take the best of each to make a final package



that is even better than the individual solutions each party brought to the table.

The rigid ideologies of left and right are the barriers to rekindling the spirit of John Brandl. The outrage industry – politicians who win and hold office by exploiting ideological divisions, advocacy groups that raise money by leveraging fear of the “other side,” and media outlets that exist to promote anger over real and perceived grievances – all benefit from keeping these barriers in place.

To be sure, these are challenging times, far removed from Brandl’s culture. But America has been here before, many times, and we have found ways to work through the divisions because there is this central truth about America: We are a country always in the making. There never has been a time in which the American people have said, “This is as good as it gets; time to stop.” Or “Our grand experiment has failed and it’s time to abandon all hope.”

Instead, Americans often stumble and bumble, but eventually a path forward opens, leaders grasp the will of the people and change happens. It is the process that gives credence to one of the most popular Winston Churchill quotes that the great statesman likely never said: “Americans will always do the right thing, only after they have tried everything else.”

In great acts of courage, Americans often find their voices of civility, their commitment to collaborate and create solutions. The early suffragettes and their descendants who rallied for equal rights; those who crossed a bridge in Selma, Alabama, knowing the police violence that waited for them on the other side; the men and women who stood up to harassment and worse in educating the country that love is love; and the many other activists and advocates who raised awareness and educated a population through civility and ecumenism. They went about trying to do what civil rights activist Dorothy Cotton said, to “fix what ain’t right” in our society.

In the end, leaders heard their followers, most of whom will be forever anonymous. It is the courage of everyday activists, their investment in Brandl-style politics and policy, that wrote the new pages of a country always in the making.

That is the abiding truth of America. Change may be slow. It may come in fits and starts. But change is certain. Sometimes it’s two steps back for every one step forward. Sometimes it is truly darkest before the dawn. But we are a country that is still more John Brandl than Tucker Carlson.

This is not the time to give up hope, but to remember that great acts of courage start with one person. Closing the chasms that divide us isn't someone else's job. What Brandl taught is that each of us has a contribution that not only can be made but is essential to success. It takes personal involvement, the contribution of time and resources and the willingness to be public in the endorsement of civility. Yes, that means wading into the fray with friends and family, personal networks and, for the especially brave, social media. Yes, that means taking the time to learn and listen. Yes, that means getting out of one's comfort zone, taking a stand and lending your voice to those of others working for collaborative solutions. Getting beyond the divisions that are undermining our country takes a commitment of personal involvement.

Brandl taught that civility isn't just being polite. Civility is understanding. It is patience. And it is persistence, in an affable style, of course. It is the ability to see and understand problems not just as we perceive them to be, but as others define them. It is what brought people together in the Mondale-Durenberger era. It is a critical missing piece today.

Every voice matters. So does silence. We can be bridge builders. Or we can stand by silently while more bridges are destroyed. It is our challenge, our choice, and our opportunity.

Tom Horner is a long-time public affairs/public relations strategist and analyst. He was the Independence candidate for governor of Minnesota in 2010.

“*Something* Has to Anchor Civility When It is Pushed to the Limit”

by

Bob Osburn

Civility has taken on Sisyphean overtones of late. Pushing that rock uphill seems harder than ever in the age of Cancel Culture. But I think it not impossible that Minnesotans can recover John Brandl’s spirited combination of gentleness, courage, wisdom, and grace in an era desperately in need of all four. In fact, I think it very likely!

Civility is possible if we cultivate: (1) the deep-seated conviction that our neighbors, even those deeply at odds with us, are worthy citizens; and (2) humbly pursue strategies that make us deeply engage those we regard as partisan opponents.

First, the conviction, or what some would call a default idea: Whether or not you are wired for civility, when others kick your tires too hard, you either flee or start fighting. We all need some central idea that sustains civility when it is tested to the max. A core component of my worldview is that my neighbor is just as much God’s image-bearer as I am, and thus deserves to be loved as much as I want to be loved and respected. You may prefer to look for the divine spark in others or revel in notions of human equality, but *something* has to anchor civility when it is pushed to the limit.

Second, the strategies: What are the pathways for action that reinforce the conviction, or default idea, that you and your opposite party-neighbor can enjoy one another’s company? My opposite-party friend Bruce and I met through a groundbreaking program called Braver Angels, one of whose founders (Dr. Bill Doherty) is from Minnesota. The organization arranges programs that bring people together from opposite ends of the political spectrum, not to change minds but to change the way they feel about their political opponents.

Guess what? It works, in part because it asks us to first listen and find the kernel of truth in our opponent’s ideas while also inviting us to practice stating our views with clarity, conviction, and grace. Whether or not you want to be a Braver Angel, what practical strategy can make you more civil than you would otherwise be? National Night Out (held annually in August) might be a first step to meeting and appreciating neighbors with very different views. Another strategy is to volunteer *with* someone whose views radically differ from yours.

My glass half-full case for civility in 2024 only works if we are aligned with a core conviction matched to a practical strategy that says, “You are my neighbor, and, wrong or right, we can make ours a better community *together!*” John Brandl will be pleased, and so will you and your neighbor.

Bob Osburn is a Senior Fellow with Wilberforce International Institute.



Vice President Al Gore (D) greets President Elect George W. Bush (R) before his Inauguration January 20, 2001

“Dogmatic Bunkers”

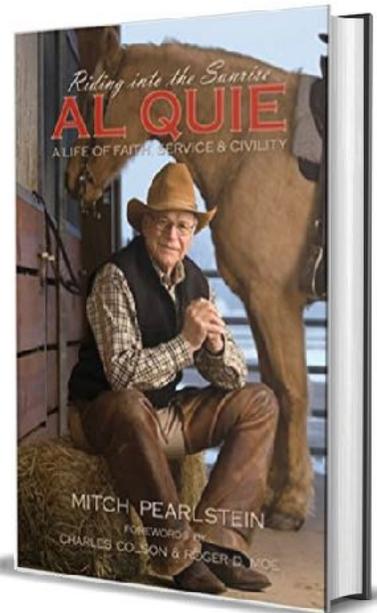
by

Mitch Pearlstein

One of the proudest things in my life was writing Al Quie’s biography 15 years ago, *Riding into the Sunrise: Al Quie and a Life of Faith, Service & Civility*. Also right up there was working with him on his Farewell Address, now more than 41 years ago.

The main reason I’ve been thinking about the bio more than usual was the governor’s passing in September, exactly one month short of his 100th birthday. The main reason I’ve been thinking about the farewell speech more than usual is the annual celebration marked by this collection of essays, “John Brandl’s Uncommon Quest for Common Ground,” and the essential question posed by this symposium, “Do You Think John Brandl’s Brand of Civility and Ecumenicism is Still Possible?”

How do they all fit together? To start, permit me to cite three extended passages from the governor’s farewell remarks, on December 13, 1982, hosted by the then-named Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. For context, the early ‘80s were terrible years economically for many state governments across the nation. This very much included Minnesota, where a major state budgetary shortfall led to more special legislative sessions in St. Paul than ever before in a two-year-span, 1981-1982. Quie was getting politically pummeled every which way every day, not just by DFLers, of course, but also by fellow Republicans. This led to his decision, in early ‘82, not to seek reelection so that he might spend his final year in office doing as much as he could to end Minnesota’s economic crisis, unconstrained as much as possible, by Minnesota’s hyper-partisan crisis.



How did his plan work out? With the eventual help of other adults in Capitol rooms, especially DFL Senate Majority Leader Roger Moe, Quie succeeded in reversing the state’s budgetary prospects, bequeathing incoming DFL Governor Rudy Perpich a projected budget *surplus*, not a deficit, for his second, non-consecutive term. That is where things stood, after the worst of the siege, when Quie delivered his farewell, two

weeks before Christmas in 1982. He started this way.

I am honored this evening by the invitation of the Humphrey Institute and its program in Reflective Leadership to offer farewell remarks. I want to talk about changes that have occurred in our society, in politics and government, and in myself over the last 25 years. I also want to talk about changes that *haven't* occurred during my time in public life.

I would like to discuss changes that still need to be made in the way we govern ourselves. And I would like to talk about what I have come to see in new light, as well as first visions that have grown only clearer in the last quarter century and more.

About a third of the way into his remarks, Quie talked about importance of better controlling “bigness” in government, while simultaneously allaying “the fears of people who legitimately need – and have come to depend on – help from federal and state governments.” Adding, we have “much to do to make our dreams work.”

Unfortunately, our political debate generally doesn't contribute enough to the task. I have grown increasingly disenchanted with the shallowness of our debate of public issues.

Let me give you two examples.

I don't think people have understood well enough the complexity of our state's economic situation. The fact that it's absurd to talk about Minnesota's problems as removed from those of the rest of the nation and world hasn't stopped many from posturing that they nevertheless are.

Political gamesmanship, of course, not just intellectual inadequacy, has had much to do with this simplistic tack. Nevertheless, we in public life have not distinguished ourselves in helping citizens – as well as ourselves – understand the nuance and interdependence of our predicament. With few exceptions, we have not engaged in that kind of debate.

The other example, by contrast, was a brief paper written earlier this year by state Representative John Brandl, who's also a member of the Humphrey Institute faculty, dealing with larger issues suggested by our economic difficulties. What marked it, in addition to its sound judgments, was the fact that it stood out so noticeably. Few other public officials had examined the issue with equal imagination.

Those thoughts led directly, a few moments later, to our current subject. They turned out to be the most frequently quoted parts of the speech.

And then there is the matter of partisanship. Politics in Minnesota suffers an excess of it. My argument is not with firmly held beliefs, as I urge conviction, not timidity. My argument, rather, is with orthodoxy based on pettiness.

As opposed to the most recent budget deliberations, and those of last March as well, the negotiations of last December were dreadful because we were all drawn – some of us obviously, some of us eagerly, none of us wisely – into dogmatic bunkers which we defended as if they were safeguarding the very honor of our parties. We were able to overcome this silliness only when I decided not to seek reelection; when the gravity of our problem finally took hold; and when legislators realized it was better to be any place *other* than St. Paul if they wanted to *return* to St. Paul.

“Dogmatic bunkers.” Perfect.

And then this hard criticism before he moved onto much more pleasant matters.

If I were to cite the biggest difference in state government now, as opposed to when I served in the state Senate in the 1950s, I would be forced to choose the often-unbending partisanship of politics that has developed in Minnesota. Again, we are serving ourselves, and our fiduciary responsibilities poorly.

I wrote a letter to the Star Tribune right after Quie’s funeral in September saying he was the “best person I’ve ever known,” so I assume some people reading this piece might think it more reverent than reasonable. Trust me, having been there, I know how his administration wasn’t faultless, and as his biographer I heard him acknowledge his assumed shortcomings nearly every time I turned on the recorder. But fact is, in identifying and lamenting what was uncivil and un-ecumenical about Minnesota and American political life as he bowed out, his strictures were dead-on then and routinely so still.

At the risk of melodramatics, current nastiness may be deadlier now.

For some offbeat reason this symposium got me thinking about “The Life of Reilly,” a TV sit-com from the 1950s in which William Bendix ended every episode – when something went screwy, as it always did – by saying in a pained voice, “What a revolting development this is.” Jumping 60-plus years ahead, how to make progress against

the decidedly unfunny, revolting situation bedeviling us now? Other writers in this collection urge a range of ideas and proposals, none of which I have any problem with, quite the opposite. So, in the interest of both variety and brevity, here once more is quintessentially Quie, with more of a prayer and imploration than a proposal, again from his Farewell Address, about 45 seconds in.

I entered public life with a strong, though still-developing belief in the sanctity of the individual, the centrality of the family, and the compassion and good sense of people in neighborhoods and local communities. I believed that all people have infinite worth and that all people possess gifts that can be known fully by no one.

My belief in those ideas gained strength as the years passed and I better saw their worth, and as they withstood the doubts of skeptics and the strain of great change. Nothing, but nothing has challenged my early – and lasting – belief in them. And, most certainly, nothing has altered my belief that it's through love which we share with family and friends – and, yes, even extend toward enemies, and the hand we hold out to those in need, that God's grace is most apparent.

Take special note, please, of what he said about “enemies.”

An afterword. When I joined Al Quie's staff a little more than halfway through his four-year term, office scuttlebutt was that John Brandl was the governor's “favorite Democrat.” Nice. But what kind of friends were they?

I visited John in hospice about ten days before he died in 2008. Since my wife, the Rev. Diane McGowan, is an end-of-life chaplain, I had learned something about how it can be okay – good and welcomed actually – to have serious, albeit appropriate and respectful conversations with men and women at the end of their lives. So, towards the end of my half-hour with the former Humphrey dean, I asked him, “What is it like to die?” Some people shudder when I tell them about this, not that John did.

He made it quite clear he wasn't happy about dying, but that the past weeks and months had given him a chance to see and talk to old friends he hadn't done so with for a while, though there remained two friends he hadn't seen or spoken to. He mentioned two names, one of which was Al Quie. That also was the visit when I told John that a group of additional friends, of whom I was one, hoped to establish a living memorial in his name, and I asked for his blessing. His “yes” was a soft smile. That was the birth of “John Brandl's Uncommon Quest for Common Ground.”

Later that evening I sent an email with John's answer about the project to the rest of the group, adding what he had said about two people he hadn't heard from, but without my saying who they were. The governor was not a member of that group, but I copied him on the email hoping he would figure out he was one of the two absent friends. Quie immediately so did and visited John the next day.

Mitch Pearlstein is Founder Emeritus of Center of the American Experiment. He's currently writing a book about the economic and moral case for second chance hiring.



“Away from Social Media and the Most Incivil National Leader in U.S. History, Civility and Ecumenicism Can Prevail”

by

Dane Smith

Every day in every kind of human community in this nation and state – in tens of thousands of local governmental councils and in deliberations of public and private and nonprofit circles and other interactions – people are reasoning together and reaching agreement and moving forward without bitterness or violence.

These gatherings are by necessity almost always an ecumenical mix of conservatives and liberals and moderates, MAGAn and Democratic Socialists, and infinite varieties of independents and third-party sympathizers. Broad-based civility and ecumenicism is the norm in the real world. This reassuring context, however, is always missing from the relentless click-bait narrative on our screens, to the effect that America is hopelessly and bitterly divided, destined for some sort of widespread crack-up or even an apocalyptic civil war.

That prospect pervades our consciousness because a very large percentage of the news and social media we see is all about the most incendiary characters and the very small percentage of instances where civility has completely broken down, such as the U.S. House of Representatives. (Relatively civil bipartisan agreement on major issues, including immigration and the federal budget, has been achieved several times recently in the U.S. Senate.)

Still, there’s no denying that civility is in decline, or at least that’s the perception, and this is one of those realms where perception creates reality and makes incivility worse.

A 2023 American Bar Association poll found that 85 percent of respondents believed civility has declined and is worse than 10 years ago. Social media was blamed by a plurality (29 percent) as the primary cause, followed by mainstream media (24 percent), and public officials themselves (19 percent). Upside to the poll: Almost 80 percent said they were not happy with this and wanted more civility and compromise from elected officials, especially on immigration and gun control.

We cannot overlook a primary cause of this decline, in the form of one particularly malevolent and anti-social individual, who arrived at center stage about 10 years ago.

Our national scene has been dominated through three presidential election cycles by the most notoriously rude, uncompromising and incivil bully in the long fractious history of American politics.

This character uses social media incessantly to dehumanize everyone who opposes him and all who fall out of lockstep with him. He ridicules people with disabilities, women, and even wounded veterans. He never apologizes or expresses an ounce of the basic humility that sages over the millennia have extolled as necessary for human comity. And instead of being removed from the stage (he did lose two elections, by 3 million votes in 2016 and 7 million votes in 2020) about 30 percent of the American electorate has made him a God-king, to be worshipped and followed no matter what he does or says.

The late John Brandl was the antithesis of Donald Trump and there can be no doubt that he would be aghast at Trump's shredding of the social contract and norms of civil discourse. He would probably be charitable in trying to understand the motivations and legitimate concerns of the millions of MAGA zealots.

Understanding and analyzing Trump's ability to incite white rage and incivility has created a cottage industry. Many writers and historians have explained how precursors from the John Birch Society to Pat Buchanan's declaration of a culture war played a part in reviving white nationalism, resentment of newcomers and people of color. The result has been a rise in fundamentalist Christian theocracy and other belief systems that defy the basic civility and ecumenicism of the American system. Conspiracy theories, utter falsehoods, and cynicism and denial of the humanity of one's adversaries (calling them "vermin," for instance,) have become more commonplace.

To be sure, anger and incivility is rising on the left too. A relatively small anarchist element foments various forms of violent and incivil expression. Ad hominem attacks and abusive language do come from all sides of contentious issues. Incessant and indiscriminate accusations of racism may actually encourage more incivility and alienate potential allies for racial justice. And there is cause for concern about an iteration of radical theory that regards the United States as fundamentally and uniquely evil and illegitimate, creating a "burn it to the ground" mentality, revolution rather than reform.

That said, we must be wary of attaching a false equivalence to our incivility problem. Equating the righteous indignation of those protesting real injustice to the reactionary and violent white rage against that legitimate protest (as in the Charlottesville confrontation between white nationalists and civil rights advocates) is simply unfair.

Equal censure for urban protests following George Floyd's murder and the horrifying January 6 attack on the seat of our democracy is particularly absurd. Demonstrations against the essential realities of police brutality and racism have been boiling over into violence for centuries in this nation, and many perpetrators who took advantage of the situation through looting and vandalism have been prosecuted. In stark contrast, the full-bore violent insurrection of January 6, 2021 was based not on a truth but on the utter falsehood of a stolen election. And it was aimed at overturning that election result and using violence to prevent a peaceful transfer of power for the first time in American history. Those perps also have been prosecuted but their leader, also under indictment, continues to portray them as heroes and promises to pardon them.

We must remember too that legitimate protest spilling over into incivility has been a hallmark of liberal democracy in the United States since its founding. It goes back to rowdy Jacksonian Democrats seeking equality for white men without property; through the abolitionist movement and Progressive Era; to the New Deal and the Great Society; and to the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements.

Similar fevers have gripped the nation and then subsided. But we can't wait. All people of good will need to get beyond "hopes and prayers" and do what we can to bring down the temperature and reduce the rancor. Participating in one of the Red-Blue workshops sponsored by the Minnesota-based organization [Braver Angels](#) is one of many options.

We also can be reasonably confident that Minnesota's tradition and reputation as a particularly civil society will carry us through. Time magazine in its iconic 1973 cover story ("The Good Life in Minnesota") lavished praise on a state that was finding practical and innovative solutions due to an ecumenical working relationship between liberal DFLers, moderate Republicans and generous business leaders. The article was written at a time of great national upheaval over civil rights, the Vietnam War, and a president who was creating an "enemies list" and in deep trouble for illegal activity.

"If the American good life has anywhere survived in some intelligent equilibrium," Time rhapsodized, "it may be in Minnesota." May it always be so.

Dane Smith is a retired journalist, advocate for progressive causes, and author of MinnPost's recent "Reappraising Minnesota" series.

“Relationships are Key to the Sound and Smooth Functioning of Democracy”

by

Lori Sturdevant

Mention John Brandl, and his big smile and open-armed greeting spring to my mind. I was a journalist, writing stories about his work that he knew some readers would praise and some would scorn. My visit likely would not make his life easier. Yet when we met, he always seemed genuinely happy to see me. He seemed interested in me as a person first, a journalist second.

I suspect he greeted scores, maybe hundreds, of people with the same genuine warmth. He understood that kindness was key to building relationships, and relationships are key to the smooth and sound functioning of democracy. And functional democracy, for John, was a lofty goal, worthy of his life’s work.

Ask whether John Brandl’s civility and political ecumenism are still possible 16 years after his death, and I wonder first about what has happened to relationships in American civic life. It’s been in vogue to encourage Americans to hate each other. Too few have condemned that approach to public life with the term it deserves. It’s anti-American.

The memory Minnesotans hold of John Brandl stands as a rebuke to the hate-mongers. My hope is that we will lift up John’s relationship-building ability not as a pleasant accessory to his work, but as central to it.

My hope is that Minnesotans will understand the need to populate our institutions with people who exhibit strong relationship-building skills. Such people are still among us, but many today are discouraged from participating in civic life. It’s up to us to do what Brandl would have done – encourage them with a smile and open arms.

Lori Sturdevant is an author, columnist, and retired Star Tribune editorial writer.

“A Reflection During Our Time of Troubles”

by

Stephen B. Young

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere Anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

In his poem “The Second Coming,” William Butler Yeats well-described the state of American culture and politics in 2024. Our best stand aside waiting while the worst among us connive and rant and divide the spoils as best they can among themselves.

John Brandl took with grace and courage a stand against all “blood-dimmed” tides of intolerance and extremism.

Yeats warned us, and John heeded his warning, that we must never let things fall apart; we must strive to keep the center, the meeting point of minds and hearts, where the overlapping Venn circles meet one another, each embracing the other.

Aristotle advised us to seek the golden Mean between opposites and extremes. He and Cicero recommended a “mixed” constitution accommodating different social elements as most beneficial to a Republic. So did the Buddha when speaking of the Middle Way, and Confucians when following the Doctrine of the Mean, or using the *Yijing* to find a beneficial equilibrium of Yin and Yang forces. The Quran provides guidance that we should always keep the “balance” – the *Mizan*.

After thinking about the morality of government, our Caux Round Table for Moral Capitalism proposed a set of ethical principles for government. These principles resonate with many wisdom traditions with respect to the use of power as responsibility in trusteeship. Such trusteeship responsibilities define the common good, what John Brandl was always watching out for, first to discern, second to make happen, and third to defend against opposing tides of time and fortune.

*There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat;
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.*

“Julius Caesar”
William Shakespeare

The fundamental moral premise for just government is held to be that public office is a public trust. Those in government and those who seek positions in government must be guided in thought, emotion, and action by a commitment to responsibility to others. They are fiduciaries. The CRT Principles hold that “Officials are custodians only for the powers they hold; they have no personal entitlement to office or the prerogatives thereof.”

Thus, the phrase: “public servant.”

John took his service seriously.

But what did he serve? His own ambition? His need for attention? His Catholic faith? His partisan ideology? His social aspirations for preeminence?

The *Old Testament* puts the case of bad service plainly and severely:

The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

Ezekiel 34

The duty of the shepherd is to do what is best for the sheep – and for every public servant what is best for those who are to benefit from the application of public power.

The lens to be used by public servants to center their thinking and efforts is the common good, not my good or your good, nice as though you might be.

Sometimes the government serving my good advances the common good at the same time and sometimes I should subordinate my selfishness to the good of others.

In American practice with its Calvinist origins of faithful ministry, the meeting point of individual good and the common good was framed as “enlightened self-interest”, or as Scot philosopher Thomas Reid put it, “self-interest considered upon the whole”.

Now, if your need is to “understand the whole” or become “enlightened,” what must you do?

Listen.

Think.

Analyze.

Discuss.

This is what John did without hesitation or annoyance. And we are better for it.

We can think of John’s search for common ground as a process philosophy or, more actively as a best practice. The common ground emerged at the end of the process; the content of the common ground was not birthed as an a priori truth (or an unquestionable discourse regime) to be imposed on the process.

Thus, the process unfolded so that a common good could first be appreciated and then achieved.

The test of justice is not its fidelity to “my” truth or “your” truth but whether it provides an outcome that is more transcendent than the prejudiced preferences and perceptions of just anybody.

That search is fiduciary responsibility in action; the taking of due care of others in mind and heart.

As Pope Francis, who shares John’s faith, reminded us in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, it is the dignity of the Samaritan who came to the aid of a stranger in an act creating a common good of trust, care, and confidence one in another.

Steve Young is Global Executive Director of the Caux Round Table for Moral Capitalism. His newest book is tentatively titled American Overlords: The Rise of the New Class and the Decline of the Republic.

