

Common good. / Two simple words /that very quickly morph/ into a tsunami of inquiry. Simply stated, the common good is determined by what is best for everyone – you could say, the greatest good for the greatest number. But, in reality, considering the common good/ is like taking the lid off of Pandora’s box.

From the time I agreed to do this reflection /I found myself thinking about it a lot, having conversation with others / and looking for words to express it. The problem was/ there were more questions than answers /and they kept expanding beyond my reach. It felt overwhelming and impossible to embrace - a puzzle with so many pieces/ but without an image to guide the way. I decided to go back to the basics - what does it mean? What does it look like? How do we do it? Is anybody talking about it?

I’ll share some of my findings with you/ which were somewhat helpful but not necessarily answers :

First,The common good is a notion that originated over two thousand years ago in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. More recently, it is defined as “certain general conditions that are...equally to everyone's advantage”.

Secondly,the common good includes social systems, institutions, and environments/ on which we all depend ... public health care, access to education, public safety and security, peace among nations, a just legal and political system, an unpolluted natural environment, and a fair and healthy economic system. It ensures the accessibility/ to each person of what is needed to lead “a truly human life”.

And, third..... “All citizens must understand/ that they share a common fate. In the long run, either all citizens flourish/ or no one will flourish.”

What are ‘certain general conditions’ /and who decides? How do we define/ ‘a truly human life’? All or none/ sounds pretty dramatic/ but I don’t doubt it has validity. Philosophers of the ages have stated /that democracy will fail /if citizens become more concerned with personal benefits/ than with the common good.

Two simple words that imply/ a complicated, challenging and complex philosophical basis /upon which to build a democracy. Let’s think about it: Common good /can only exist collectively. It requires agreement, /cooperation, participation and accountability in a social and cultural context/ and it simultaneously respects/ the individual rights of every citizen. That is massive under any circumstance, and hugely compounded/ by today’s political environment.

As Americans we believe in the power and strength of the individual /and many take great pride in that /to the point where words like ‘socialism’ or ‘collective’ become

inflammatory. When I think of American individualism /I see the cowboy in the old cigarette commercials – tough and independent, /doesn't need anything from anybody – the boot straps ideology /that promotes the belief /that everyone is on their own to fend for themselves /and that freedom means /I can do whatever I want. How do we reconcile that /with the idea of a collective set of principles and shared resources/ that we can agree upon, /live by /and for which we are held accountable/ AND that will benefit everyone equally?

It's easy to forget /that we don't all have the same opportunities in life /or access to the same resources. If you are born into of a self-perpetuating /subculture of crime, addiction and abuse, how do you break out of that? Are we willing to tolerate/ or worse, look away from /the deprivation that exists there? Can we call that/ 'a truly human life'?

A teacher of mine used to say: With freedom comes responsibility. Author Umair Hacque wrote an article /inspired by his reaction/ to Americans refusing to wear a mask /during a global pandemic. It is titled "How Freedom Became Free-Dumb in America". (That's free-d-u-m-b). In making a distinction between/ *freedom from* and *freedom to*,/ he states: "America became obsessed [with free-dumb](#): the idea of freedom /as the removal of all restraint, /the right to harm others,/ the ability to do anything you please, /no matter how destructive, toxic, foolish, or inane. the right not to ever have to cooperate, /to invest or to act/ for the common wealth or common good. The freedom "to", on the other hand, is vilified/ as something that

only communists and socialists would want. Why? / Because my “freedom to” — say to be educated,/ or to be healthy — requires your input, help, and cooperation. “

I like to use a driving analogy/ as an example of this theory. I am free to go wherever I want/ and I have the right to a driver’s license, /but I also have a responsibility /to know and follow the laws /that make driving safe for everyone. It requires agreement /and cooperation from all drivers. But what happens /if I decide/ I have the right to do whatever I want /and don’t have to follow rules? Driving at a high speed/ going north in a southbound lane /is not a good idea and will not end well. So, we have all agreed /to respect the law /in order to protect ourselves and others.

In the best of situations, we are interdependent – mutually dependent on one another/ to support each other’s emotional /and physical needs /without demanding or controlling the other.

When I lived in an apartment in San Francisco /I hardly knew my neighbors. But when I moved to rural New England /and my nearest neighbor was a half mile away, we got to know each other/ almost immediately. During those first winter storms, when their car or mine /would go off the road and get stuck, /we inherently knew that we would help each other.

At the same time, we respected each others privacy. We might never have crossed paths socially /or in the larger community /but /on that road to home /we knew we could count on each other - without ever having to say so.

The common good might start right there – small acts of kindness /to help someone in need – the seed /that can help us grow/ into a more inclusive/ and caring society. Community organizations, /places like North Chapel, /are built on the grounds /of supporting and providing for each other /with the hope that everyone /can meet their needs /and have a satisfying life. It is a concept that is equally as important /in our small towns /as it is in our enormous and varied nation.

I often wonder if we don't all know, /deep down, /the difference between what is right /and what is wrong, /that to be human /means that we act humanely. If we think about /what we consider inhumane, the definition of a 'truly human life' begins to reveal itself. We want to know the answers /but perhaps we aren't asking the right questions/ and need to reconsider. Is it humane /to separate children from their parents/ against their will? Who benefits /from these kinds of actions? How can we say /that is in the interests of the common good?

The response to the Covid pandemic/ is an unfortunate example of a missed opportunity /to remind us of the importance of good government/ and the common good. The best scientific research and evidence /tells us that covid is real/ and that a mask, social distancing and a vaccine /are necessary to stop it's spread /and save lives. Therefore, it would be in the interest/ of the common good /that we agree and act /on the suggested precautions /to protect ourselves and others. We may not want to believe it /but this is the very best information /we have right now. Some

would say /that it is their individual right /to deny and to refuse /all of the above. Those who accept it /and follow protocol /feel their lives are threatened /by those who don't. We are now living /with the confusion and consequences /of an inability /to articulate or agree /on what is the common good. Even more concerning/ is our inability to agree /on what is truth.

An article /by the Center for Applied Ethics /at Santa Clara University concludes: "Everywhere, it seems, social commentators are claiming /that our most fundamental social problems /grow out of a widespread pursuit /of individual interests."

I often complain /about politics and inequality /because I believe/ that in this country, /there is enough for everyone. Somehow we have to find a way /to change our conversations from ME to WE. Our 'common fate' - our survival - depends on it. It requires us to sacrifice some of our freedom, some of our personal goals /and our self-interests. It asks us t/o look around, /put aside assumptions and stereotypes, open our hearts /and be more inclusive.

A few years ago/ I decided to become a FEMA reservist - which means /that when there is a national disaster - such as a hurricane or fire - people like me/ have agreed to be ready to deploy /in 24-48 hours - not knowing for sure /where we're going

/or what we'll find there- - or not find. The goal /is to set up the DRC - Disaster Relief Center - within 72 hours /or less of the disaster. The needs of survivors and their communities /are urgent /and have to be addressed immediately /for recovery to begin. The Center has to be accessible to everyone,/ and to meet the many regulations and policies /of a public "government" building.

FEMA folks always say/ "every disaster is different"/ and it's true. So much preparation and logistics/ go into anticipating an event, /yet there is no hard and firm blueprint - there are always issues /specific to a particular disaster. In a place like Puerto Rico /or Louisiana /where so much has been destroyed, /there might not be building or structures left /for opening a DRC /where survivors can come for help, /and connect with the many agencies and social services there /that provide everything from food and housing /to mental health and legal advice.

FEMA is an amazing organization /of caring, hard working people /committed to helping survivors put their lives back together. There's a lot of bureaucracy and politics/ that can come into play. It's not perfect, /things change a lot /and it can be challenging- you have to be "FEMA flexible" - but it is impressive and inspiring/ and gives me hope.

I wanted to do this /because I believe personal challenges that take me out of my comfort zone /are an opportunity to learn and grow. I also want to try to

understand/ how we have become so divisive. I learn a lot/ by going to other parts of the country/ and hearing what other people are thinking and experiencing.

For a period of time – maybe a month or two or three – I am submerged in a culture/radically different from my life in Vermont. There is the community where the disaster happened /and then there is the DRC community. You would think /that showing up for 10 or 12 hours /6 days a week /would knock you out. But your teammates are all doing the same thing /and we're all there with the same single focus. In the people professions, you have to bring your heart. We are about to meet people/ who might have lost everything they had. So we keep each other afloat /and sometimes form unusual and lasting friendships.

Everybody wants to know /where everyone is from/ and when I respond "Vermont" I hear things like /"Oh, Vermont. Liberal state, Bernie. You must be a socialist". And to be honest /in places like rural Texas /I make assumptions about them, too. I like to think/ that maybe in the midst of this surreal situation /we can see some decency in each other/ and discover that we aren't so different. Maybe we can even have a conversation about what's important to us - things from which to build some common ground.

There's a familiar story you may have heard. A grandfather /is speaking to his grandson about violence and cruelty in the world /and how it comes about. The old man explains /that it is as if /there were two wolves/ fighting inside his heart – one

who is vengeful and angry – and the other /who is understanding and kind. The boy listens intently /then asks his grandfather - which of the two wolves /will win the fight in his heart?’ His grandfather answered: ‘the one that wins /will be the one I choose to feed’.

That story reminds me/ to recognize the potential for basic human goodness /that we all have within us. Sometimes things happen in life /and the angry wolf gets the food /and can only see the common bad. It creates a barrier/ that is hard to cross. But if we can get past that /with respect and dignity /and try to feed the loving wolf in each of us, /there is a chance to reconnect.

Maybe if we make goodness /more common /we can nourish /the common good.

In ‘Taking the Leap’ /Pema Chodrin writes: “As human beings /we have the potential /to disentangle ourselves from old habits, /and the potential to love and care about each other. We have the capacity /to wake up and live consciously, /but, you may have noticed, /we also have a strong inclination /to stay asleep. It’s as if we are always at a crossroad, /continuously choosing /which way to go. Moment by moment /we can choose to go toward further clarity and happiness /or toward confusion and pain.”

In other words, which wolf wins?

We are in a moment, I believe, of shifts and transformations/ and reconsideration on a national and global level. There are a lot of uncertainties/ but also opportunities.

We might be in the midst /of one of those rare occasions – often a result /of something horrible or disastrous – where going back /might be a hindrance /to going forward. Some of the practices of our past /may no longer serve us well.

What will be on the other side /of surviving this global pandemic? How can we begin to heal/ and pick up the pieces? The outcome isn't clear - but there will be one. Can we consider the common good/ in today's terms, /addressing 21st century issues and needs? Can we clearly articulate /the value of sharing our wealth and resources /for the good of our citizens /and the benefit of our survival?

It will take truly creative thinking /and innovative ideas, /compromise, and commitment /not only to the common good /but also to a greater good /that can sustain us.

I'll end this as it began – with more questions. From Umair Hacque: “Anyone /can be foolish, destructive, selfish, greedy, hostile, cruel. To be fully human, though,/ is to cultivate the higher values /of empathy, grace, truth, beauty, love. When I have to struggle for food, money, or medicine, /what room do I have to cultivate those

things? I curdle inside, instead, /and wither. It's only when I have the basics /that I can really engage/ with the higher struggle of being human. How do I love? Care? Know? Emote? Empathize? Understand? Share? *Grow?*"

Imagine /living in a society /where freedom means we all have the privilege /of asking these kinds of questions. At this week's inauguration, poet laureate Amanda Gorman said: "If you can see it, you can be it." May it be so.