

Unity and Harmony in a Civil Society

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While working on my hobby I had an experience that taught me how unity and harmony work together to preserve and strengthen civil society.

My hobby is music. I am a keyboard player. My two keyboards of choice are a Hammond B3—the staple organ in popular music—and a Korg synthesizer. To entertain family and friends it's fun to play along with records and CDs from various favorite bands. My learning experience concerns a problem I faced with a song from one band, where the original recording was slightly out-of-tune (off pitch). I really wanted to play this song for everyone—in tune. What to do?

Then it occurred to me that this might just be a physics problem, where the sound waves in the original recording weren't vibrating quite accurately. So I selected a "Fender Jazz Bass Guitar" on the synthesizer, learned the bass-player's part in the song, and recorded an in-tune and slightly-higher-volume bass guitar line, using the synthesizer. Amazingly, with the powerful bass guitar notes now in tune, the sound waves for all

the other instruments' voices also were harmonically nudged into tune as they reached the ears of the listeners; and I could "join that band" with all of us being in tune—no problem. This experience illustrates to me the importance of true voice in making unity and harmony possible.

Society Out of Tune

For various reasons a society can get out of tune. A fairly recent analysis of the importance of demographics illustrates this point. In his book *The Big Sort* [1] reporter Bill Bishop explains how, during the period from 1976 to 2004, with about 5 percent of the population moving to live in a new location each year, Americans began to cluster—not as much according to traditional demographic factors such as education, income, and race; but rather they were clustering in neighborhoods according to personal-preference characteristics (e.g. political views). He explains that "when people move, they also make choices about who their neighbors will be and who will share their new lives." [2] He argues that because disposable income has been increasing, people have been able to indulge their personal preferences in choosing where to live; and they want to live among like-minded people. However, he continues: "... like-minded homogenous groups squelch dissent, grow more extreme in their thinking, and ignore evidence that their positions are wrong." [3]

Bishop suggests that this clustering has created what he terms "social resonators," which he further defines as follows:

"What happened over three decades wasn't a simple increase in political partisanship, but a more fundamental kind of self-perpetuating, self-reinforcing social division. The like-minded neighborhood supported the like-minded church, and both confirmed the image and beliefs of the tribe that lived and worshiped there. Americans were busy creating social resonators." [4]

Classical sociologist, Max Weber, referred to the general process of separation from outsiders using powers like social resonance, as "closure." [5] In society, closure is enacted through the use of many types of power: e.g., economic, cultural, social, symbolic, psychological, political, etc.[6]

The concept of closure is important to a conversation about unity and harmony in a civil society because it operates in a very predictable way. When power is used to divide, it either takes the form of *usurpatory* closure: subverting the laws and norms that regulate the power of a society; or of *exclusionary* closure: closing off the opportunities of those in society who are less powerful.⁶ [7] However, in contrast,

economic, cultural, social, symbolic, psychological, and political power also can be used to unite—to create openness rather than closure. I would argue that openness can be enacted where these societal powers are used to promote *respecting and honoring* the laws and norms of a civil society; and for *including* those who are less powerful. Thus openness counters closure.

Some might say that the divergence of opinions enabled by openness actually leads to closure, or that freedom of expression threatens unity and harmony. I disagree. In this respect I join many who argue that it is a commitment to “the idea that the results of free expression are to the general benefit in the long run, however unpleasant they may appear at the time” [8] that enables us to imagine a society where both “tonal” and “atonal” expressions can embrace unity and harmony. Not every tune is Mozart. But every Mozart, Schoenberg, or Bartók composition can still be played in tune.

So in a society that presently seems to be slipping out-of-tune, where the ever-more-homogenous clusters of people are less-and-less in tune with each other; it is important to examine what might represent the *strong “baseline” notes* to be played by those who seek—through fostering unity and harmony—to preserve and strengthen civil society. A recent book by James and Deborah Fallows, *Our Towns*, offers some suggestions.[9]

Society In Tune

From 2013 through 2016 James and Deborah Fallows, using their single-engine prop airplane, journeyed over 100,000 miles into the “heart of America” to visit 43 towns and cities. They met with hundreds of people, among them: artists, business people, civic leaders, educators, entrepreneurs, environmentalists, immigrants, librarians, planners, students, and workers. From their experiences, they distilled what they term “10½ signs of civic success.” [10] Of particular interest to me are those that enable unity and harmony. A few brief quotes illustrate the kinds of voices that—when strong and true—have been shown to unify and harmonize, thereby to preserve and strengthen civil society.

While there are 10½ suggestions in the Fallows’ book, some of these suggestions are more applicable, because they focus on the personal-preference characteristics that lead to civic success (others being less applicable because they focus more on civic infrastructure). I cite here only those illustrating the kinds of personal-preference example which, when set, can effect unity and harmony and a civil society.

- **“People work together on practical local possibilities, rather than allowing bitter disagreements about national politics to keep them apart.** ... The more often national politics came into local discussions, the worse shape the town was likely to be in.” [11]
- **“People know the civic story.** [The value of the civic story] ... is in giving citizens a sense of how today’s efforts are connected to what happened yesterday and what they hope tomorrow will bring.” [12]
- **“They make themselves open.** [In the towns and cities that had civic success, the people] ... frequently stressed the ways their communities were trying to attract and include new people ... The same emphasis on inclusion that would make a town attractive to talented outsiders increases its draw to its own ...” [13]
- **“You can pick out the local patriots.** ... Who makes this town go? ... a person ... whose influence everyone felt.” [14]

Returning then to the idea of unity and harmony, I cite an apt statement from noted American Pastor, Aiden W. Tozer (1897-1963), who is reputed to have said in one of his sermons:

“Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow.”[15]

His metaphor, as one might expect in a sermon, referred to the Almighty. However, his point also is important to our discussion. It will be those strong and true voices in tune with civic virtue that can set the tone, the standard for a civil society. As James and Deborah Fallows have found, those whose voices encourage working together for a good common purpose—a purpose that connects what happened yesterday with hopes for tomorrow, and which also encourage openness—can be the civic patriots: those who sound the *strong “baseline” notes* that can help to bring members of an otherwise divided society toward harmony—back in tune with each other. I therefore reason, as follows:

- If the geographic clustering that divides us is taking place based on personal-preference characteristics;
- And if such clustering is taking us out-of-tune as a society;
- Then there also ought to be *true-voice clustering* that can sound the strong and true *civic “baseline” notes* that effect unity and harmony—simply by sounding them.

Each of us can sound the strong baseline notes of civic virtue with our words and by our deeds. Personal example, strong and true, is the basis for the true-voice clustering that makes

possible unity and harmony in a civil society. I conclude with the words of Eleanor Roosevelt that capture the essence of my message: *Divide and conquer! We must not let that happen here.*

[1] Bishop, B. 2009. *The big sort. Why the clustering of like-minded America is tearing us apart.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

[2] 2009: 5.

[3] 2009: 39.

[4] 2009: 6.

[5] Weber, M. 1922/1978. *Economy and society.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

[6] Vahidnia, H. & Mitchell, R. K. 2016. *Management theory's Faustian bargain: Complicity, conquest, and the modern corporation.* Presented at the Academy of Management 2016 Annual Meeting, Anaheim CA.

[7] Murphy, R. (1984). The structure of closure: A critique and development of the theories of Weber, Collins, and Parkin. *British Journal of Sociology*, 35: 547–567.

[8] Woodward, C. V. 1974. *Report of the Committee on freedom of expression at Yale.* New Haven, CT: Yale.

[9] Fallows, J. & Fallows, D. 2018. *Our towns: A 100,000-mile journey into the heart of America.* New York: Pantheon.

[10] 2018: 401-408.

[11] 2018: 402.

[12] 2018: 403.

[13] 2018: 406-407.

[14] 2018: 402.

[15] A. W. Tozer, *The pursuit of God: The human thirst for the divine.* https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1082290.A_W_Tozer downloaded 9/15/18.