

WHAT WILL SUSTAIN THE DEMOCRACY?

Sarah McArthur

S ometime back, a strong storm blew through the area where I live. The wind blew so hard that the next day found me navigating around broken tree limbs and branches that lay strewn across the streets throughout the county. Turning a corner around a “planned community,” I noticed a young tree that had been completely blown over. Not broken in half, it lay intact across the sidewalk with its root ball exposed and out of its shallow hole. I thought to myself, “Somebody needs to save that tree.”

And I proceeded to my destination.

A few days later, I drove the same route. The tree was still down, in the same position, helplessly blown over. I thought to myself again, ‘Somebody needs to save that tree.’ The urgency I felt that someone needed to help the tree was much stronger, as was the dismay and disappointment that “they” weren’t doing so.

Again, I proceeded to my destination.

The next day I drove by the tree again. It was still in the same position. Again, the thought repeated across my mind, ‘Somebody needs to save that tree.’ Yet, this time another thought followed right after.

‘Well... I’m somebody.’

The recognition of me as a possible solution made me laugh out loud. Unsure if I was really “somebody” as I wasn’t part of the “them” who were assigned responsibility for the tree, like the city, the community’s maintenance crew, or even the homeowners whose homes butted up to the sidewalk where the tree lay, I decided to take action anyway.

I called a master gardener friend for instructions on how to replant the tree for its best chance of survival. Then, I called another friend to help as this would be a two-plus

person project. We met at the tree and were beginning our work when a car with a young family in it stopped on the side of the road near us. “Do you need some help?” called out the young woman from inside the car. “That’d be great!” I called back. Her husband and their daughter got out of the car. He helped us dig a deeper hole and bury the root ball back into the ground. The young girl stood by watching us work together to save the tree and serve the community.

Satisfied that the tree was secure, we thanked each other and went our separate ways, each of us pleased to have been of service together. A few weeks later another unusually wild storm blew through and the tree went over again. Not a day passed before I was back at the tree with my shovel, stakes, and twine to prop it back up. But, this time, the subdivision’s yard maintenance crew beat me to it and shored up the tree properly and professionally. Today the tree still stands, strong and sturdy and likely to be providing shade and shelter for people, bugs, and birds for the next 50 years.

In those few moments together saving the tree, we had exemplified on a small scale the answer to a turn on a question posed in 2010 in the *Harvard Business Review* by Frances Hesselbein, in her article “How Did Peter Drucker See Corporate Responsibility?” [<https://hbr.org/2010/06/how-did-peter-drucker-see-corp>] Her question was “What must our organizations do today to help our country maintain its greatness and sustain the democracy?”

Today, in light of the growing power and voice of the individual as “leader,” I would ask additionally, “What can we as individuals do to help our country maintain its greatness and sustain the democracy?” For it is we individuals who make up the “institutions, enterprises, and organizations in three interdependent and equal sectors,” that Frances references in her article, and it is we as individuals who form the communities, neighborhoods, and global society, upon which our country and our world depend. As such, our democracy’s very survival is dependent on how we interact and support each other, how we work together toward a common purpose, and on our commitment to serving the greater good for all.

The responsibilities of leaders must be very clear.

In recent years, I often hear from the desk of the Chief Executive Officer/CEO, from the front of the classroom, from the podium, and from the pulpit that “We are all leaders.” Given this critical shift in the language from being termed “followers” to now being called “leaders,” then the responsibilities of leaders must be very clear to everyone.

In the 2010 HBR article, Frances quotes Peter Drucker: “Leaders in every single institution and in every single sector... have two responsibilities. They are responsible and accountable for the performance of their institutions and that requires them and their institutions to be concentrated, focused, limited. They are responsible also, however, for the community as a whole.”

As all of us then are responsible for our communities as a whole. No longer can we rely blindly or otherwise on the lone leader at the top to call the shots and save us from peril. We are all “somebody,” we are all leaders with the responsibility to support, serve, and sustain the democracy within which our communities can thrive.

To that end, we must ask ourselves, am I taking responsibility in my community, my organization, and in our world, or am I waiting for “them” to fix it and blaming “them” when it remains broken? Am I working together with others towards a common good, or am I ignoring, or worse, silencing the voices of those I don’t want to hear? These aren’t easy questions to answer, but they are crucial to address honestly now if we are to sustain the democracy and ensure a bright future of healthy, productive communities for those who will be here even after we are long gone.

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh



Photo by Tom Shillea.

Sarah McArthur is editor-in-chief of Leader to Leader, thought partner and trusted advisor to world-class leader former CEO of Boeing Commercial Airplanes and Ford Motor Company Alan Mulally, and executive producer of Defining Moments: The Life and Leadership of Quiet Revolutionary Frances Hesselbein. She is writer and editor of numerous books, including Making Waves, Work Is Love Made Visible, and Coaching for Leadership, advisory board member of the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Forum at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs (GSPIA), founding member of Marshall Goldsmith's 100 Coaches, and former chief executive operating officer of Marshall Goldsmith, Inc.