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The Friendship Club and the Well-Springs of Civil Society

by William Schambra

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I am honored to be a part of the 19th Annual E. F. Schumacher Lectures and particularly pleased to be here with John McClaughry. Some eighteen years ago I was standing very nervously in a conference room at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., about to give my premier presentation as a research scholar with the American Enterprise Institute. It contained the seemingly preposterous suggestion that the notoriously conservative new President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, was in fact a proponent of restoring political emphasis on the value of the small community in America, an emphasis then allegedly the exclusive preserve of the left. Astonishingly, just as I had begun to eye the exit, one of President Reagan's close advisors materialized at my side. He had read the speech I was about to deliver, and he assured me that I was not in fact delusional, putting into my hands copies of Reagan's speeches that proved it. This is as close as I have ever come to a divine apparition. That presidential advisor was, of course, John McClaughry. I have always been

deeply grateful for that singular act of kindness, and I am pleased that he seems not to have repented of it since.

The story today, though, begins far from the plush conference rooms of the Mayflower, in a seedy back alley just off Fond du Lac Avenue in Milwaukee's inner city. There, two years ago, Shameika Carter's body was found beneath a pile of clothing. She had been beaten and strangled to death. With a record of four arrests on drug charges, she was not unfamiliar to the police called to the scene. At her last arrest, three bags of cocaine had been found in her coat pocket.

Her family pointed out that she had recently been seen with a stranger at the nearby Friendship Club, upon which a cloud of suspicion immediately descended. But Eugene Kane, a local journalist familiar with the central city, soon set the record straight. The Friendship Club, he wrote, was a fiercely independent social club for recovering addicts, established in the 1970s by low-income African-Americans after it had become clear to them that they were not welcome at other recovery clubs. The club sat in a tough neighborhood, around the corner from a massive, derelict former Sears, right between MJM Liquors and Club Sensations. Yes, it welcomed prostitutes, as well as the shivering addict, the homeless wanderer, and the bleary-eyed, hung-over drunk. Anyone could find a home at the Friendship Club as long as she or he obeyed the rules rigorously enforced by its members—no drugs or alcohol, no physical abuse, no weapons, no gambling.

Now, they will tell you in fund-raising school that a well-publicized murder on your doorstep is not the recommended way of catching the attention of potential donors. But something about Kane's description of the Friendship Club made it intriguing to us at the Bradley Foundation, and so we ventured down to the site on Fond du Lac Avenue. It was precisely as described: a social club with high-intensity card games, a lively pool table, a blaring juke box, and a bar. But behind the bar were to be found only fruit juices and soda. The schedule for the numerous AA, NA, and other twelve-step support groups that rented space upstairs was posted prominently. Before we left, Alex Mitchell, one of the club elders, had proudly thrust into our hands a maroon-covered volume, *The History of Friendship, Inc.*, an 85-page monograph commissioned on the occasion of the Club's twentieth anniversary in 1994, prepared by member James Miller.

As a rule, I don't spend much time with the boiler-plates of grant-seekers. The stories they present are, to put it charitably, insufficiently balanced. But this book I read. And I was richly rewarded. Based on the minutes of the club's board meetings and reminiscences of the elders, it told the real story of the Friendship Club, warts and all: the struggles among

various factions and charismatic leaders; the secession of dissident groups to start their own social clubs; the pressure from landlords seeking back rent; committees springing up like weeds but failing to do their work or even to meet; members failing to pay their dues; boards of directors suddenly resigning—or being fired—en masse; liquor bottles surreptitiously passed at club events; rumors about grant funds disappearing.

The headings of the chapters tell the story: "Hard Times," "Struggle," "Conflict," "Turnover," "Controversy," "Crack Down." This quote from the club's minutes gives you the flavor of the volume: "On the Board level, arguments broke out between Board members at meetings which caused the Board not to meet on a few occasions. Most of these debates concerned club policy. Some simply involved struggles for power and control. The newly voted in secretary had not been seen for months."

As I read the history, the realization suddenly came to me that I was staring into the turbulent, murky well-spring of civil society. And then this realization: in spite of all of today's scholarly and public attention to civil society, a group like the Friendship Club would be completely overlooked.

Why would I suggest that the Friendship Club is the well-spring of civil society? As we learn from Alexis de Tocqueville and the other classical theorists of civil society—and I hasten to promise, no Tocqueville quotes—the indispensable function of civic associations in a free society is instruction in the art of self-governance. Democratic self-government requires a citizenry able to manage its own public affairs. Citizens learn that strenuous art only by doing it—by coming together and working on a common public task, with the ends and means settled upon only after slogging through the messy, aggravating, democratic process of argument, debate, bargaining, and compromise. And that occurs most effectively within the small, face-to-face communities sociologists describe as "intermediate associations" or "mediating structures."

Tocqueville insisted that learning the art of self-government within local civic associations would be particularly critical in the new age of mass democracies, when public life would appear to be dominated by vast, impersonal social forces far beyond the average citizen's understanding or control. The great temptation in such times—in our times—is to turn public affairs over to an equally vast and impersonal bureaucracy of experts, who will all too readily agree that they and they alone know how to deal with those social forces. Now more than ever—precisely when it seems to be *least* appropriate, useful, or fashionable—the decentralized, self-governing civic association becomes indispensable for the preservation of self-

government.

For the addicts of Fond du Lac Avenue the Friendship Club is the first and by far the most difficult step out of a life dominated by external forces and into self-governance. This is true for club members in the most literal and immediate sense, of course. Their lives had become radically and physiologically dependent on drugs or alcohol. The first task of the club is to break the enslaving chains of that tangible chemical dependency. But as anyone who has been around addiction knows, chemical dependency is usually accompanied by all sorts of other real or imagined dependencies on outside forces, which seem to make drugs or alcohol necessary. I must drink because the factory where I used to work closed down or because I'm poor or because my family was dysfunctional or because I live in a cruel, oppressive society. And I can't stop drinking unless I can get into that government detox program run by a bunch of MSWs and PhDs.

Now, however powerful these externalities may be, the old hands at the club will tell us in no uncertain terms that they simply are not acceptable excuses for drinking or drugging. The seemingly iron grip on their fate—the hitherto unchallenged sway over their wills—must be challenged and broken. Only when they succeed in narrowing their dependency to one object—a higher power, which for most club members is unmistakably the God of the scriptures—can they become literally and immediately self-governing.

Self-governance is cultivated in another sense as well. The club struggles to be as much as possible a self-contained and self-governing community. It seeks to be a zone of freedom, a morally fortified enclave, a place where those in recovery can seek shelter in the very heart of an environment that would lure members back into a world dominated by the real or imagined social forces that seem to compel addiction.

In the early days of recovery it is not uncommon for members to show up the moment the doors open and not leave until the early morning hours the next day. As one of them noted, "I started coming around this club every day. . . . I was going to meetings three, four, five times a day. I was sitting in this club day in and day out. I was sleeping in the back room. . . . At nighttime when the club closed I'd sleep in the car right out in the parking lot." For him and for many others the club is the warmest and most welcoming community—almost a family—hat they have ever found: "This is my club. I live here, I work here, I belong here. I ain't never belonged nowhere else. I've been in all them dope houses and taverns, but I ain't never belonged nowhere like I belong right here."

Within this zone of self-governing freedom, new attitudes and

virtues are painstakingly cultivated. Dwain Berry noted, "I didn't know anything about life, and the club gave me the first look at life, real life. Being responsible, learning how to be humble, understanding humility, gratitude, patience, and all those things I learned came from the people down in that club." Members slowly acquire virtues like personal responsibility and self-possession by hands-on engagement in the day-to-day governance of the club. They elect committees from among themselves to open and close the club, work behind the juice counter, clean up, conduct fund-raisers, and recruit new members.

The picture is not always pretty, as we've seen. The habits of self-governance, in both the personal and public sense, do not come easily to individuals who have spent years, perhaps decades, submerged in irresponsibility. The newly elected secretary may indeed not be seen for months. But only by struggling together patiently and humbly through the chaos, confusion, and corruption that seem to be intrinsic to popular self-rule do the members slowly develop the capacity for democratic self-government. Members of the Friendship Club acquire the political habits essential to American democracy as an intrinsic part of their personal recovery process.

But if this is all true, why—in this time of heightened attention to civil society—are we likely to overlook the manifest contributions of the Friendship Club? Consider first the way conservatives tend to regard civil society. For many of them it seems to be the realm of charity, volunteerism, and benevolence of the compassionate rich toward the hapless poor. General Colin Powell's manifestly well-intentioned mass mobilization of volunteers to do good deeds in the inner city is an example of this approach. It assumes that there is nothing but desolation and emptiness there until we wealthy suburbanites appear with our shiny faces, buckets, and brushes to slap a fresh coat of paint on its grimy walls.

Now, John McClaughry and I would both hasten to point out that this was by no means the way conservative Ronald Reagan spoke about civil society. He was much closer to Tocqueville's understanding of it, calling for "an end to giantism, for a return to the human scale." But almost immediately after Reagan became president, that vision deteriorated into quarrels over how much money rich corporations were obligated to give to poverty programs. In spite of the efforts of genuine decentralists like McClaughry, Bob Woodson, and Bob Hawkins, conservatism in the Reagan and Bush years became identified with the noblesse oblige of "a thousand points of light."

How does the Friendship Club fit into this framework? Not at all. The entire point of the club is that there is something good in the inner city, something started and run by the residents

themselves, entirely without the benevolent attentions of suburban do-gooders. The last thing the club needs is the paternalistic condescension of well-meaning volunteers operating from the premise that recovering addicts cannot be expected to manage for themselves. It would directly nullify the club's efforts to inculcate self-government among its members. It is unlikely that the club would know what to do with such outside "help." It is certain that most conservatives would not know what to do with the Friendship Club.

But if this is so, then perhaps a place like the Friendship Club would be championed by activists on the opposite end of the political spectrum—by community organizers on the left who profess some interest in the empowerment of neighborhood groups. Again, I suspect we would be disappointed. "What can civic ties possibly accomplish if residents of a community have declining incomes and no jobs?" laments Michael Shuman of the Institute for Policy Studies. A great deal, members of the club might reply, for building civic ties is almost exclusively what it does. It does not take on politically the larger economic and social systems that organizers are persuaded dictate conditions in the inner city. Not that those systems and conditions are unimportant or that club members have no involvement individually in changing them. But to suggest that the individual is powerless in the face of seemingly overwhelming social forces is the way addictions are rationalized rather than conquered. To focus the club's energies on changing the surrounding conditions—on *external* transformation—might well fatally compromise its essential message of personal responsibility and internal transformation. So please do not expect the Friendship Club to be in the vanguard of political advocacy. Likewise, do not expect community organizers to champion the club as a model of citizen action.

In truth, though, today's discussion of civil society typically focuses neither on suburban volunteers nor on radical community activists. It tends to focus instead on that vast realm of often quite substantial organizations and agencies known as "the nonprofit sector"—the Boys and Girls Clubs, the Red Cross, the PTA—which defies easy categorization in either the conservative or radical frames of reference. In the early days of the Reagan administration, for instance, conservatives clearly assumed that this sector was their natural ally, and so they waited for applause when they suggested that nonprofits might be able to tackle some of the problems government had mishandled. Conservatives were more than a little embarrassed when the sector declined this honor, with prejudice. The nonprofits pointed out that they are no longer models of free voluntary labor. Indeed, large portions of their budgets often come directly from federal coffers in an arrangement that has come to be known as "third-party government."

In recent discussions of civil society, conservatives have wised up to this state of affairs and are no longer surprised when a representative of Catholic Charities shows up on Capitol Hill to denounce reductions in funding for government social programs. Thus Father John White in 1996: "Our personnel on the front line—the caseworkers, counselors, therapists, nurses, supervisors, and social workers—are angered and frightened. . . . [W]e must insist: Enough is enough! There cannot and must not be more budget cuts to programs that serve poor people."

While the left was immensely gratified at the nonprofit sector's refusal to play the role assigned it by Presidents Reagan and Bush, it had its own complaints about the nonprofit sector. Drawing on Saul Alinsky's critique of the welfare state, Harry Boyte, John McKnight, and others on the left complained that the sector seemed less interested in cultivating active democratic citizens than passive, helpless clients to whom it could lucratively deliver a growing array of social services. As McKnight, a previous Schumacher lecturer, put it, the typical nonprofit no longer sought to build a genuine neighborhood but to replace it altogether with a "comprehensive, multidisciplinary, coordinated, interagency 'wrap-around' service system."

If the nonprofit sector is neither a realm of conservative volunteerism nor of radical activism, then perhaps it would welcome into its midst the Friendship Club. Again, however, we would be disappointed. We see why when we consider what has come to light about the nature of the nonprofit realm from conservative and radical critiques of it: over this century nonprofits have indeed become less and less agents of community self-governance and more and more agencies for the delivery of social services.

To appreciate this transformation it is necessary to understand the larger development of which it is a part, namely, the triumph of the American progressive vision over the course of the twentieth century. At the century's outset progressive theorists like Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, Edward Alsworth Ross, and John Dewey concluded that daunting new social forces like industrialism, urbanism, and immigration were sweeping away the old America of small, self-governing local communities. To avoid social chaos a new order would be needed but now one compelling and encompassing enough to tame those forces. Happily, they believed, the new century also brought with it new sciences of society so potent that they would enable us to forge a coherent America on a scale dwarfing the old rural village. Frederick Taylor's concept of scientific management taught us how to reorganize ourselves—business, labor, government, and civic sectors alike—not towering, efficient, bureaucratic social machines. In the penthouses of these new pyramids sat experts

credentialed in the emerging disciplines of economics, sociology, and psychology. Modeled on the omnipotent natural sciences, they gave the new authorities such powerful insights into hitherto inscrutable social forces that they and they alone—so they thought—could understand, harness, and tame these forces. Armed with the social sciences, the experts were going to marshal the turbulent masses into coherent, productive units with a few deft, austere, rational directives.

What about democratic self-governance according to this view? It could only be a hindrance to the new science of social control. Ordinary citizens, still immersed in benighted, parochial loyalties to family, faith, ethnicity, and locality were incapable of the detached scientific objectivity necessary to cope with the twentieth century's new social forces—at least pending indoctrination in John Dewey's new education for scientific democracy. Their "distorted" and partial views only cluttered up the neat, unified, national vision of the scientific elites. Far better for Americans now to think of themselves not as self-governing citizens but as passive, grateful clients of the credentialed experts, who would assume the burden of rationally directing public affairs. As Andrew Polsky put it, "Social control theory completely depoliticized the social integration of the urban masses. Scientific control left no room for a community to define itself . . . through self-governance and administrative autonomy. Such practices left too much to chance." In short, Tocqueville's science of association was discarded as a quaint relic of the past as his nightmare vision of the new age became progressivism's utopian dream.

Under the sway of this dream the nonprofit sector transformed itself along rationalist, progressive lines. Even aside from the issue of government funding, nothing less seemed to be required by enlightenment and sophistication. So today the nonprofit sector is dominated by mammoth associations that are organized indistinguishably from large government agencies, with centralized, bureaucratic management structures executing directives issued by headquarters in Washington. They mail out annual reports that may cost as much to produce as earlier nonprofits once scraped together for their entire annual budgets. Their offices teem with accountants filling out the paperwork needed to attract and report on federal grants and with public relations specialists insuring that the best spin is put on their efforts. Above all, the nonprofits employ swarms of experts well-credentialed in the century's powerful new social sciences who dutifully deliver services to their passive, helpless clients. Should well-meaning volunteers threaten to interfere with this smoothly humming machine through their amateurish enthusiasm, they are relegated to stuffing envelopes with the latest fund-raising brochure designed by a slick downtown advertising agency.

In short, today's nonprofit world is peopled by experts, clients,

and volunteers—or, as Father White so tellingly put it, "caseworkers, counselors, therapists, nurses, supervisors, and social workers"—but not by citizens. Would such a sector embrace the Friendship Club? That sector prides itself on its scientific basis, whereas the club is clearly an organization rooted in ethnicity and faith. A good nonprofit is orderly, rational, and structured, whereas the club appears to be disorderly, irrational, and unstructured. A good nonprofit hires experts to deliver services to passive clients, whereas the club insists that its members must be self-governing citizens helping one another, with only the expertise of the streets necessary. The nonprofit sector would more than likely regard the Friendship Club as at best a remote and somewhat disgraceful family relative.

We have arrived, then, at this paradoxical conclusion: the Friendship Club, which I suggest is the well-spring of civil society, nonetheless does not at all fit the descriptions of civil society championed by conservatives, liberals, or centrist nonprofits. For the club seeks to be a genuinely self-governing community, not the passive object of the attentions of sympathetic volunteers, steely-eyed political organizers, or well-meaning therapeutic experts.

Given this paradox, it would be easy to be pessimistic about the prospects for the future of civil society. Indeed, pessimism does seem to be in the air, especially in the wake of Robert Putnam's famous jeremiad entitled *Bowling Alone*. Based on the drop-off in membership of major civic groups in America, including most notably the PTA, Putnam fears for the future health of civil society. But let us not despair too quickly. The PTA, after all, is a typically progressive, modern nonprofit organization intended chiefly to enlist passive parental consent to the dictates of the scientific education elite, usually through a subtle but powerful process of intimidation and indoctrination. The last thing the PTA is designed to do is empower parents to govern their own schools. If there is any doubt about this, one need only ask, When was the last time the local PTA challenged any major decision by the school administration or teachers union? That citizens are beginning to drop out of organizations like the PTA does not prove they are uninterested in self-governance. Indeed, it might be a sign that they are eager for it but are no longer willing to settle for seductive substitutes like the PTA. What some find a reason for pessimism about civil society may in fact be cause for hope.

But there is a yet greater cause for hope for civil society's future, and it is implied in the founding circumstances of the Friendship Club, which was established by individuals who were so radically marginalized that they felt unwelcome even in other inner-city recovery groups. They located it in what

seems to be, in civic terms, a bleak no-man's-land long since abandoned by government, business, and the major nonprofits alike. Indeed, it finds itself in one of the harshest social surroundings imaginable, other than a war zone. This might seem like the last place on earth one would expect to find a thriving civic association. But there it is—and here is the ray of hope—not *in spite* of its surroundings but precisely *because of* its surroundings. Long after the social pathologies of the inner city had driven out society's baffled bureaucratic experts, its citizens came to realize that they themselves must establish their own enclave within which those outside forces no longer hold sway, an island of self-governing independence in the midst of a sea of implacable social causality.

This was not just the last available alternative of desperate people, as it turns out, but the *best* available alternative all along. For the self-governance the club cultivates is precisely the necessary antidote to a toxic environment—an environment that by its very nature cultivates dependency and addiction as well as negation of human freedom and personal accountability. All the larger society has to offer against dependency on chemical substances is substitute dependencies on well-meaning volunteers or political organizers or therapeutic experts. Only a true civic association like the Friendship Club breaks the chains of dependency in the name of genuine self-governance.

This is the truly good news about civil society: it is not some delicate and rare flower that blossoms only when the social and economic circumstances are ideal; it is, rather, a tough, hardy perennial that springs up in the flintiest soil after fire has burnt off everything else and when circumstances seem to be the worst.

This should not be altogether surprising, of course, given what we know of America's historical experience with civil society. Civic associations have played their most important roles on the frontiers and the margins of America, well away from centers of elite cosmopolitanism where experts hold sway. Tocqueville suggested that Americans were compelled to learn the science of association when they found themselves facing the daunting challenges of society-building thousands of miles from their familiar and comfortable settings, with no government in sight and among strangers with whom they shared no ties of kinship, ethnicity, or faith. The societies they were trying to build, furthermore, were often based on views of life considered contemptible or dangerous by the orthodox elites, resulting in marginalization, persecution, and exile. Where Americans have found themselves most weak, vulnerable, and exposed—at the margins, whether by choice or by expulsion—there they have turned most avidly to civic association for mutual support and sustenance.

It also should come as no surprise that many American civic associations, including the Friendship Club, have roots in the Christian faith, for Christianity as well began as a voice crying in the desolate Judean wilderness, far from the gleaming temples of the metropolitan establishment. It originated as a call for a new kind of community, bringing together publicans, prostitutes, lepers, Samaritans, and other outcasts, disreputables, and marginals who could not or would not find a place within the well-established order of their day. Christianity's initial form of organization—the small, tightly knit underground cell—was the Tocquevillian civic association of its time, proving to be powerfully subversive of the established imperial bureaucracies. And we know from Paul's letters to the early churches that these lively self-governing enclaves were by no means smoothly humming machines but rather were wracked by all the democratic distempers so familiar to us from the Friendship Club. In the words of another Schumacher lecturer and board member, Kirkpatrick Sale, the early Christians "lived in democratic and independent communities, sometimes in secret and sometimes openly but always apart from and hostile to whatever state might claim sovereignty."

If we seek civil society today in its purest and healthiest form, then we should not be dismayed to find that it is relatively scarce in the most comfortable neighborhoods of America. They remain by and large the unchallenged turf of the progressive regime of expertise. We must search for civil society instead in the most hard-pressed and seemingly desolate sectors at the margins of our national life. There the social sciences have conspicuously and undeniably failed and have fled the field in disarray. There citizens have no choice but to face their own vulnerability, brokenness, and incompleteness. They are compelled to turn to each incomplete other in order to form a mutually supportive civic community.

That is why, when we at the Bradley Foundation launched our own program to support civic renewal and a new citizenship six years ago, we began our search for potential grantees in the poorest neighborhoods in Milwaukee. These were the parts of the city that the experts downtown assured us were devoid of civic life. They were, to be sure, littered with the wreckage of the progressive welfare regime, but they were by no means civic dead-zones, as we discovered when we asked Bob Woodson's National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise to help us in our search for possible grantees. He soon led us to Bill Lock, whose Baptist Church had launched its own business incubator in an abandoned tire warehouse; Cordelia Taylor, who had turned her family's home into a community-based elder-care facility; Deborah Darden, who helps former welfare mothers in a public housing project restore a strong spiritual atmosphere for their children, and many other grassroots

leaders. Once we had learned from Woodson how to look, we began to identify effective grassroots groups on our own. Before long we found ourselves avidly turning the pages of *The History of Friendship, Inc.*

Like the Friendship Club, all of our grantees in the new citizenship program have grown weary of being treated as passive, helpless clients by the therapeutic experts of the progressive state. They are instead taking control of their own lives and neighborhoods, rebuilding their communities according to Tocqueville's science of civic association. In short, they are once again acting as genuinely self-governing citizens.

Our experience with the "new citizenship" initiative suggests that the effort to find and to fund civic associations that are truly instruments of self-governance is not for the faint of heart. Such associations require some effort to locate because unlike the mainstream nonprofits they seldom respond to "requests for proposals." They do not have the elaborate fund-raising arms, powerful boards, fancy fund-raising brochures, or glossy annual reports that the establishment nonprofits have. Their grant applications will not be studded with currently fashionable sociological concepts but rather may speak unabashedly in retrograde religious terms. They have duct tape on their carpets and water stains on their ceilings. Their staff, if they have any, typically did not acquire their expertise through credentialed professional programs but on the streets, engaged in the very activities they are now trying to stop. Indeed, many of them, like the Friendship Club, are composed of individuals hovering on the edge of renewed bouts with addiction or crime, so there may be episodes like those described so honestly and courageously in the *History*.

The world of establishment philanthropy, furthermore, is unlikely to applaud grant-making to true civic associations. It is far too threatening to the very premises of the progressive regime of scientific expertise. Because we at Bradley have been so reluctant to fund the major downtown service-deliverers and so critical of progressivism, for instance, we are regularly denounced as reactionary, plutocratic oppressors of the poor albeit very clever ones, skillfully masking our perfidy by buying off various neighborhood leaders. Those who are in philanthropy to adorn their walls with Giver of the Year awards should stick with the PTA and forget about the Friendship Club.

For all its difficulties, however, no approach to grant-making can be more richly rewarding than the search for representatives of civil society. Following Bob Woodson's rules—among them, deal only with groups that are located in the same zip code as the problem they are tackling and that were in existence before funds became available—it is in fact

possible to locate genuine, self-governing civic associations. Indeed, once one acquires the eyes to see, a rich and thriving but previously invisible neighborhood life suddenly springs into view. Because such groups are small and their professional staff sparse, modest grants go a long way. Goals are concrete, immediate, and measurable—fix the roof, repair the van, buy the crack house next door—not sheathed in gauzy nonprofit double-speak typically involving "hard c" words as in "coordinate an on-going consortium of collaborative coalitions." Their appeals are mercifully free of melodrama and full of quiet determination: we seldom hear, "Unless you give me all I ask for, these children will starve," but rather: "I am going to care for these children. If you want to be a part of it, fine, but at any rate I am going to care for these children." As for the organizational weaknesses of grassroots groups, they are remediable through training programs like those offered by Woodson's center.

Above all, of course, the reward is the certainty that support for genuine civic associations is not simply replacing one form of dependency—on drugs, alcohol, or gangs—with another—on volunteers, organizers, or service deliverers. Not only are we helping to inculcate a measure of healthy self-governance in the citizens most immediately involved, we are also helping to secure the long-run future of our self-governing democracy. As Tocqueville pointed out so long ago, a nation of passive, helpless clients—the danger he most acutely feared in the new age of mass democracy—cannot long sustain a free republic. Only a nation that practices the art of association can do so.

From this perspective, even some of the apparent institutional vices of a group like the Friendship Club may be seen instead as subtle democratic virtues. The endless multiplication of and turmoil within committees may not be a sign of dysfunction but of the joyous clatter of newly self-governing citizens learning first-hand how to run their own affairs. The schisms and secessions of dissident groups perhaps should not be regarded as mission failure but as the way civil society propagates itself, through endless, tumultuous fission.

Even the life crisis the Friendship Club faces today, as once again its dues-paying membership list slips dangerously low, may simply be civil society's way of quietly phasing out groups when they no longer answer immediately the needs of citizens and replacing them with others that will—an art, incidentally, that government and mainstream nonprofits have yet to master. And if the Friendship Club should survive this crisis, as I hope will happen, it will make for a heartening chapter in the next history of the club's struggle to bring self-governance into a world of dependency. In the meantime, perhaps we will learn to read the turbulent history of the Friendship Club not as an alarming tale of chaos and failure but as an inspiring story of a healthy and vital self-governing community—a story

of genuine American democracy.

After all this, are we to conclude that true civil society is a necessity only in the worst neighborhoods of our central city? Only if we believe the promise of scientific progressivism that its experts can protect us from, or at least conceal from us, our own human weakness, vulnerability, and exposure. An incident like the massacre at Colorado's Columbine High School so shocks our sensibilities precisely because it reveals to us, in a flash of frightening and painful insight, the hollowness of that promise. In a comfortable suburban setting saturated with all the scientific expertise money could buy, the horror nonetheless appears. And our only response seems to be to hire more expertise in the form of scores of grief counselors.

Our frail mortal condition will inevitably bring us more and more such flashes of painful insight. We will come to realize that scientific progressivism is based on a false utopian promise of invulnerability, while genuine civil society is rooted in the human reality of our vulnerability. As we comprehend that, we may stop approaching groups like the Friendship Club as patronizing volunteers or agitated organizers or benevolent service providers. We may instead come to them as seekers. For they possess a profound truth about self-governance within a genuine human community—a truth we all desperately need.

Excerpts from the Question Period

It seems as though the Friendship Club is thriving on its own without getting handouts. How does your foundation help fix the roof without creating dependency?

It's something we're always wrestling with. Let's be concrete: the Friendship Club struggles to keep its doors open by means of dues and the rental of the upstairs space to twelve-step groups. A year or so ago they asked us to help them have an air-conditioning system installed on the second floor so they could continue to receive rental income, and we did help them with that. That has been our only significant involvement with the Friendship Club so far. Now they've come to us again and said, We're going broke. They're in a panic because their membership list is shrinking. Instead of saying to them, We'll give you the money so you won't have to worry about collecting dues, we said, You've got to straighten out your own house, and we will help you do that.

We'll recommend folks who can work with them to reorganize their membership, reorganize their board, bring members

back into the fold in a more productive and fruitful fashion. We have people in Milwaukee who go in and work with a group like that to bring their administrative house in order. We can also help with some of the larger capital costs that they probably couldn't raise the money for. We have to look at each application very closely. One of the questions we ask is, Are we in fact displacing volunteers? Are we displacing some element of self-governance by making this grant?

You have to be very careful about how much you give to small organizations. Five thousand dollars is a lot of money to the Friendship Club. And I suppose a \$5000 grant would be almost impossible for a large foundation like the Ford Foundation to make. How could they do the incredibly sensitive exploration and relationship-building required? The new foundation established by Bill Gates and run by his father, in order to meet its required minimum IRS pay-out, would have to distribute \$5 million a day! That gives you an idea of the scale we're now dealing with in the foundation world.

Are you implying that there's an appropriate role for experts in an organization like the Friendship Club?

Experts always have a role, but they should be on tap, not on top. If the Friendship Club decided to bring someone with a master's degree in social work on staff to do counseling, it would be a sign that they had lost their initial fire and fervor. The simple answer is yes, experts have a role to play as long as they're not taking over the organization or displacing the elements of self-governance. The groups we work with typically have very few paid staff.

Within broad parameters established by the Internal Revenue Service, foundations can do just about anything they want with their money, and yet they have unfortunately chosen to structure themselves almost identically along the lines of the federal government in terms of the kinds of requirements they place on grantees. If a foundation were approached by a group without credentialed experts on staff, chances are it would look with some displeasure on their application. It wouldn't make a grant to an organization that didn't have a certain level of trained professional expertise. These are foundations within the by and large "anything goes" civic sector, and yet they have voluntarily chosen to organize themselves with all the onerous burdens and requirements that the federal government imposes, and it's a shame.

If there's an accountant or an attorney who wants to do something good in the inner city, the typical model is for that person to go to a feeding program and ladle soup for a couple of hours. I think that's a terrible waste of resources. Cordelia Taylor would love to have an accountant come and help her

with her books. She would love to have an attorney come and help her straighten out some of the legal matters she's involved in. Why can't that happen? It would provide something useful for that attorney and that accountant to do. That's the way professionals could be helpful.

People come to these people like Cordelia Taylor with all sorts of preconceptions in their heads about how they're going to straighten things out for them and get them on a businesslike basis, and of course before long they discover that they have a great deal to learn from Cordelia Taylor.

I am a citizen advocate with the Connecticut State Department of Mental Health. I hear language being used that I find harmful, for instance in describing people as "consumers" and "providers." How important do you think it is for me to make an effort to change this sort of language?

That's a valuable point. It's true especially of the words "expert" and "client," and it's the same with "consumer": consumers of services, clients of service providers. Once you use language in that fashion, you've already almost lost the war. If you're talking about consumers, you're just talking about markets and people responding to the offerings of the experts, saying yes or no to whatever the experts have to offer. You can usually tell a lot by whether or not the word "citizen" appears in the literature and how often.

It seems to me that there can be some very fruitful cooperative efforts between government organizations and local citizen groups. This is true of the work I do in a local private school. We get government funding for things we want to do, with very little oversight even though there are certain rules you have to follow. I don't think the situations you described are necessarily black or white.

The Bradley Foundation is notorious for being a supporter of school choice, of vouchers for education, so I know something about the struggle connected with government involvement in schools and education. Cooperation is possible, but it is a struggle to preserve the character and autonomy of a private school, especially a private parochial school, whether it's Catholic or Lutheran or Muslim.

Simply to pass school-choice legislation is only the beginning. Then to keep the schools truly free within that system is an extraordinarily difficult process. I think it is possible to have some kind of cooperative relationship, but if the government comes to you and says, We love what you're doing; it's wonderful, and we want to help you do it—be very concerned. But if the government comes to you and says, We hate what

you're doing, and we're going to fight it every inch of the way—then OK, maybe you can work something out.

[*Question inaudible*]

One of the sources of decentralist conservative thought today is the work of the participatory-democracy left of the sixties. It's not often acknowledged, which is too bad because I think conservatives could learn a great deal from it. I've always tried to point out that there are similarities between what folks in the sixties were saying and what conservative Republicans are saying today.

Rather than going with the traditional kind of conservative-liberal-progressive categories, we might look at the fundamental causes of some of our problems and recognize that each realm—conservative, liberal, and progressive—has some piece of the truth to offer us. Conservatives are saying we need to promote self-sufficiency and individual responsibility. Liberals are saying there are people who are hungry; we have to feed them right now while we try to figure out how to help people be more responsible. Progressives are saying the whole system is set up in an unfair way so that because of skin color and parental background some people have more opportunities than others. All of them are speaking a truth.

I think you're right that different parties each have a piece of the truth.

I used to think it was important to have these battles out over systems, over markets vs. government, over the kinds of questions you raise. We can go on with that for hours and hours and never get anywhere, but I suspect that if you begin in the real world with people with real names and talk about them, you would discover that we admire the same kinds of people, we admire the same kinds of efforts, and isn't it too bad that we are stymied politically because we have these megasystems in our heads and we're not able to talk to one another productively. If we look at the real world and look at the Friendship Club or Deborah Darden or Cordelia Taylor, we would say, That person is a hero, and I want to help her, not in a patronizing way, not trying to take over what she's doing.

Over the years I developed a friendship with Harry Boyte, who teaches at the University of Minnesota and is the author of *Community Is Possible* and *Common Wealth*. We found it helpful to agree not on megaprinciples but on concrete specifics. We were able to agree from very different perspectives that a certain organization was a good

organization, that it was doing good things for a certain purpose. Henry Boyte and Bob Woodson are both great admirers of Bertha Gilkey, a public-housing activist well-known in St. Louis. Although they come from exactly opposite sides of the political spectrum, they agree that Bertha Gilkey is a hero and that she is doing something spectacular.

Instead of bringing various megasystems into proximity with one another, I've always found it easier to start with the specifics and the concrete and the particular. Even though I am a conservative and many of you are not, I think we in this room would all agree that the Friendship Club is a worthwhile enterprise that's doing good things. Maybe we could then figure out together what we might do to help the Friendship Club.

It would be wonderful if the nonprofit foundation world began its deliberations not with the question of how to attack the megasystems we face out there but with the statement, Here's a really good thing happening in the inner city. What can we do to help it? How can we locate that narrow line between doing too much so that we're overwhelming a specific group with resources and giving it enough so that it can continue to do its good work of encouraging self-governance? I think you work it out from there rather than starting with the systemic discussion, which there would be a lot of disagreement about.

I was impressed by the distinction made by an earlier questioner between consumer and provider in relation to the mental health field. It brought to mind that the word "empowerment" is used a great deal, and of course I hardly need tell you how paternalistic it is to say to people: We're going to empower you. Is there any organization or approach within the world of foundations to actually address the question of the impact of a word like this or the words "consumer" and "client?" It seems to me that the type of problem you're trying to deal with directly is fostered by this type of verbiage.

I'm not aware of such an organization. Vocabulary is a problem, especially in the foundation world. If you go to a foundation meeting, the words people use don't seem to have any real-world reference. They all talk in abstract terms about such concepts as the four c's: coordination, collaboration, consortium, coalition. It's as though people were speaking a foreign language. I find it very frustrating to listen to that kind of language. Even when it's not demeaning and patronizing, it's utterly vacuous. There is no content that I can figure out, which is why it drives them crazy, incidentally, when I insist on talking about the Friendship Club. I talk about people with names and groups with names, and I name the names. They

must wonder, Why does he keep mentioning Bill Lock? Why does he keep mentioning Cordelia Taylor? The answer is, Because they're real people in the real world. I can't imagine going to a Council on Foundations meeting and breaking through their rhetorical edifice, that incredible shield of concrete they have erected. But maybe I'll be able to some day.

Excerpts from closing statement

Mr. Mander's presentation was a macrosystems approach to many of the same issues the Schumacher Society is concerned with. I was struck by the vast distance between the level at which he approached the subject and the level at which I approached it. After hearing his presentation, I'm left with the question, What on earth can we do to stop economic globalization if there are indeed these assemblages of secret corporate elites controlling it? I don't know what the practical result will be for folks in this room and people who are concerned about decentralism in the more immediate and practical sense. I'll go back to a point I made earlier, which is that we should identify the very practical and concrete manifestations of this phenomenon of decentralism that we agree on, such as the Friendship Club, and figure out how we can help and preserve this kind of organization. That really needs to be the focus rather than spinning out these mega-macrosystems of economic and capitalistic plottings against people.

As Chellis Glendinning made clear, and we must never forget this, decentralism's power comes from the fact that it has an age-old story connected with it, the story of David and Goliath, and we need to focus on the power of that story. We need always to keep our eye on the Davids of this world and the telling of their stories, as Chellis did. I think if we did that, we would find we have a lot more political clout than we realize because it's a story that is uniquely compelling in both human and political terms. It's not an accident that this is a central story in the Bible. I think the recounting of that story needs to be at the center of the movement for decentralism.