

A Stimulus Package Of, By and For the People

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Ever since coming of age in the sixties, during the Vietnam War, I have longed to believe in my country, yearned to feel proud of my citizenship. But from that time until just recently, the truth is that I was often been ashamed of “my” country’s policies and actions.

And then along came this fellow Obama—a tapestry of Black, White, Indonesia, Africa, America, Christianity, Islam--a mongrel uniquely suited for a nation of mongrels.

As I watched the election unfold something began to shift inside me. Where there was once despair and cynicism, I now felt a measure of hope and excitement. Just prior to voting, I said to myself, if this guy wins, I’m going to D.C. for the inauguration. This was not a rational decision. I didn’t weigh the pros and cons. I simply thought to myself, “I have gone to D.C. so many times to protest; I want to go to celebrate.”

As I stood by the Washington Monument amidst the multitudes on that cold January day, I realized that there was something beyond “celebration” that had compelled me to travel to D.C. It wasn’t just about this guy Obama being inaugurated. At a personal level, I realized that I had come, in some measure, for my own inauguration—my own induction—into citizenship! I had come to say “Yes!” to my country—to declare my readiness to act as a citizen instead of a cynic.

That was over a month ago. In the interim we’ve witnessed a deepening recession, skyrocketing unemployment, epidemic foreclosures, banking failures and more. People, who have lost their jobs and can’t meet mortgage payments or health care costs, are burdened with angst and fear. Even those who still have jobs register alarm as their “nest eggs” rapidly shrink.

Our government’s first response to the economic crisis has been the Recovery and Reinvestment Act—the so-called “Stimulus.” As this stimulus money was being divvied up, I found myself sitting here in Central Pennsylvania watching and hoping for good news. But then it occurred to me that citizens don’t just “watch and hope.” They act.

As I considered both where and how I could act, I realized that there is arguably no more appropriate and powerful an arena for citizen action than the social-geographic unit we call “neighborhood.” As Jay Walljasper of the Project for Public Spaces points out, “The **neighborhood** is the basic unit of human civilization. Unlike cities, counties, wards, townships, enterprise zones, and other artificial entities, the neighborhood is easily recognized as a real place. It’s the spot on earth we call home.”

So, imagine, if you will, gathering with the folks in your neighborhood to really consider your own—not the government’s—heartfelt responses to the question, What needs to be “stimulated” and “stimulating” in your neighborhood? For example, how about “stimulating” hospitality, conversation, kindness, creativity, household enterprises, art,

mutual caring, and trust? And to this end, what if we removed the fences separating our properties and refashioned them into front-yard benches? And what if we envisioned neighborhood intersections, not as simply places where two streets come together but as neighborhood gathering places with bulletin boards, food stands, tables, play_spaces, and art?

Why stop there? What if we began to wear nametags and to genuinely greet each other, stripping away the anonymity that keeps us cloistered and alone? And what if we established neighborhood enterprises—producing bread in front_yard, wood-fired bread ovens; exchanging home grown vegetables, herbs, and eggs from backyard gardens and hen houses; displaying hand made quilts for barter or sale, growing u-pick strawberries and blueberries next to our sidewalks, offering free foot massages to people trekking home from work, placing a favorite book or magazine in a special “giving box” by our mailboxes? And while we are at it, how about making a map of neighborhood households based on an inventory of household gifts and talents as well as needs? There are a thousand ways to “stimulate” our humanity and few of them, it seems, have very much to do with giving out money.

I wonder if it is really fear that is our biggest enemy in these times? When fear takes us over, we contract and our hands move from open- to close-fisted. But need we be afraid? By any assessment, isn't there enough to go around for all of us to survive with dignity in our neighborhoods and nation?

Perhaps the real challenge in these times is to shift from the mindset of scarcity to the consciousness of sufficiency. This would mean, at least in part, redefining what constitutes a “successful” life. At present we tend to think of “success” in terms of our individual accomplishments and personal security. But what if we each understood that our primary purpose in life isn't to take care of ourselves? Instead, what if we understood that our primary job was to make sure that everyone in our community was taken care of?

In this new world we wouldn't have to worry about ourselves precisely because that would be everyone else's job! I'm not promoting utopia. After all utopia" actually derives from the Greek meaning "nowhere." In contrast, inspired by Wendell Berry and others, my interest lies in stimulating "somewheres"--millions and millions of them--places stimulating in their simplicity and sufficiency. In the end, I suppose my hope resides in a "recovery" of a very different order, beyond markets and economies, toward neighborhood, neighborliness, and neighborhood commons--21st Century citizenship

