

For the graduate, one word ...

May 15, 2016

It's springtime, a time for graduations and celebrations across the country, each with their promise of a challenging and hopefully prosperous future. But it's also a time of anxiety for many who know that graduation means moving into uncertain times.

It has become common knowledge that America is losing one of the characteristics that has made it great— its middle class—and yet at the same time, it accrues wealth to a small minority of the rich and powerful. With this imbalance, our society is left with a crumbling infrastructure, polluted water, lost farm and forest land, the unresolved threat of climate change and the list goes on. A major contributor to our nation's woes lies in the corporate control of big money and its debilitating effect on our democracy.

But as dire as it looks, this dismal situation could be a rich opportunity for positive change. That however can happen only when we return to a vigorous citizen participation in our democracy.

Like the advice offered to a young Dustin Hoffman in the 1967 film, *The Graduate*, only one word is necessary. But this time it's not "plastics". This time it's "politics". Not a pejorative, petty, office politics, not the maligned and hateful politics of attack ads funded by big corporations and not the shameful congressional district gerrymandering designed to guarantee a win for a particular party. Needed instead is the politics of community engagement. That concept is the simple premise upon which this country's democracy depends, the long-respected democratic process of listening to neighbors

and constituents, of debating opposing points of view, of governing, of solving problems, of helping communities and inspiring confidence.

In the past 20 years, Americans have seen the political process, a process that should serve our best personal and collective interests, corrupted by big money. For too long the well-funded lobbies of the country—oil, gas and coal, the gun lobbies and the pharmaceuticals, to mention a few—have controlled our government, making sure that legislation will favor them and when they pull together, as we have seen during the past decade, these lobbies can bring government to a virtual halt. We need prodemocracy reforms to build renewed trust in our political process. As the current campaign for the Presidency has shown us, many citizens have lost respect for government.

Gus Speth, author and professor at the Vermont Law School has written extensively on the importance of participation in the political process in order to save our democracy. In an article published in Orion magazine titled *America the Possible*, Speth writes, “It is simply unimaginable that American politics as we know it today will deliver the transformative changes needed.... Political reform must be priority number one” He goes on to say, “Above all else, we must build a new democratic reality—a government of, by, and for the people.”

We need all hands on deck, to return America to its Democratic roots.

For the graduate, please know that the world needs your energy and enthusiasm and just remember one word, this time it's “politics.”

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