

Time to Do Something

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. — Edmund Burke, philosopher and politician, and a big fan of the American Revolution, 1729-1797.

While visions of sugar plums and the French Resistance dance in your heads after the abomination on November 8, let us please turn our attention to future social activism.

To trot out a couple of clichés, if you haven't learned the lesson of "divide and conquer," you weren't paying attention. And if you don't take Ben Franklin's advice about hanging together or hanging separately, you risk figuratively dancing on air.

End-of-year donations to your favorite non-profit are commonplace, hitting your wallet at the time you are inspired or guilted-out by the generosity-oriented spirit of the holiday season. But think of upping the ante for the new year.

When you think about what you can do, hark to a common way of thinking utilized by citizen advocacy groups to marshal their driving forces. That is looking for someone who can provide one of the three Ws: wealth, wisdom or work.

If you have the big bucks, toss them in the pot, but make sure the organization you are giving them to can show you they go to hands-on, frontline work in their programs, not to cover administrative costs. If you have a great deal of knowledge or experience in an area specific to the group's causes, offer them up on a *pro bono* basis to assist in areas where they would otherwise have to hire a consultant. And if you are simply pissed off or worried that by doing nothing you are aiding and abetting the enemy, volunteer your services to do the grunt work needed for most non-profits to survive and succeed.

But what is most needed today for social activism that makes a difference is a word that has already been beaten to death by liberals and conservatives as we emerge into a frightening futurescape: unity. The deep divides caused by the presidential election make this goal nearly impossible at the overall level, but something can be done about it working from the ground up. The old saw about "Think globally, act locally" has morphed into the reality of "Cry globally, try locally."

For all the best intentions, the progressive advocacy community has shown itself to be as concerned about turf battles, who gets the credit and public image polishing as any government entity. Major foundation supporters of advocacy groups have been pushing for partnering and coalition-building for years. But it is hard to make it happen in a viable way. Not impossible, but very difficult, even if the will exists.

What is needed are groups coming together with a clear, concise and consistent message to the public about what is trying to be achieved, in as selfless a manner as possible. While Occupy Wall Street participants mostly had their hearts in the right place, anyone want to give a quick, three-sentence elucidation of its primary goals? Thought so. Microphone-grabbing, shouting, ranting zealots looking for a spot on the nightly news aren't going to get you or your philosophical buddies very far.

You need to immediately answer the "So what?" question. If you are already involved in, or plan to undertake, certain activities, the public's first response is, "Nice. But what does it do for me?" And you

need a kitchen table answer, one that brings the benefits of your initiative right into people's houses and shows the firsthand impacts of whatever is planned or being done. (And an important corollary to this is knowing your opponents' arguments as well as your own, so they can be taken off the table before the debate begins with a "You are going to hear the other side say this, but it isn't true because..." Getting slapped down by a counterpoint response you didn't expect and looking like you were born that morning isn't a big way to draw support.)

This isn't as difficult as it may seem. Issue-oriented public advocacy groups have done a great job in recent years of showing the inextricable links between the economy, the environment, public health and social justice. But the individual organizations then tend to become too narrowly focused on their own issue. Instead of sitting down and creating a major scheme with other groups and trying to get more bang for their buck on a grander scale, it is a case of "Well, we'll let Save The Bay/The Nature Conservancy/Whoever handle the environment, and we'll take the social justice/public health/economic piece." Fine, but don't do it in a vacuum with only occasional updates from each faction so you don't step on toes in the media or public eye.

This isn't meant to be a lecture, and you are more than welcome to say, "Get stuffed." But if you are going to donate your time, energy, skills or money to a well-deserving social activist group, push them in this direction, because they still need that shove. The opposition bullshit you will face has done an excellent job of isolating arguments, neutralizing them with petty distractions and then wasting your time and money by having to defend themselves against fake news and baseless (and even lunatic) accusations.

A major, high-powered coalition of social activism groups in Rhode Island with clear, selfless goals that can be easily articulated to show how it will benefit each and every citizen who wants the payoff will not only get the attention of politicians who look at the public as walking voting ballots, but folks who you may not recognize as allies. The guy with the NRA cap may not be wearing a backpack and Birkenstocks, but he fishes and hunts and wonders where the winter flounder have gone and wants the forests protected. The investment banker in the Armani suit can't swallow the idea of selling a no-chance mortgage to a busboy at Chili's. The a-hole with the Brady jersey on yelling at the screen during a Pats game at a sports bar is sitting next to his or her childhood best friend who came out years ago, no big deal. The grease-stained guy fixing your car spent last night is wondering how he's going to pay for the nursing care needed for his mother.

Social activism is going to have to re-imagine itself to deal with a very different, already charred landscape in the future. If public advocacy groups are smart, they will hang together, act together and speak together. But *you*, man or woman, can't do nothing. The result of that is a future foretold long ago by Edmund Burke.

Chip Young is a writer, president of CY Communications and president of the board of directors of ecoRI News.