

Clarion Call

Clarion, the sound of a trumpet, loud and clear, rallying and rousing

This is a clarion call – an unabashed, flat-out, in-your-face, attempt to stimulate at least one more person to stand up and be counted, to make a difference, to give back, to get involved. A call to motivate someone who has wondered for some time if that they could, should, might get involved. If, under the right circumstances that is, with terms and conditions that meet their criteria for what right action is all about, they could throw their hat into the ring to support an issue, idea, cause, organization, or project they care about, perhaps passionately.

I can hear the moans and groans from some of you, "Oh no! Not again! Give me a break! Take your soapbox and go away!"

John Updike once said that he wrote his novels for that one reader, who he knew was out there somewhere. A reader who was his soul mate, the essential counterpoint to him as a writer without whom there was no meaning to the writing at all. I have a dear friend who many years ago went up to the famous novelist at a book signing and with trepidation in his voice said, "Mr. Updike, how do you do. I just want you to know that I am your reader!" My friend Tom may not have been the walking image that the author of *Couples* had in mind, (a gorgeous woman, perhaps?) but Updike did visualize some single reader, and so do I. This piece is written for the one reader who I know is out there, whose generosity gene lies dormant, resting quietly, waiting in the wings, picking up the signs along the road but biding time for an 'ah ha' moment, a wake-up call, a clarion call!

Clarion calls are of course suspect, and have always been so for good reason. We associate them with zealousness, insincerity, emotionalism, and transitory moments. From Elmer Gantry to the latest TV ministry revealed as charlatan, from slick speeches of politicians over ripe with empty promises, from snake oil salesmen promoting pyramid schemes, we have heard it all. And yet...

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt said "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provide enough for those who have little"...

When Patanjali (1st-3rd century BC) wrote, "When you are inspired by some great purpose, some extraordinary project, all your thoughts break their bonds; your mind transcends limitations, your consciousness expands in every direction, and you find yourself in a new, great and wonderful world. Dormant forces, faculties and talents become alive and you discover yourself to be a greater person by far than you have ever dreamed yourself to be"...

When Paul Robeson in the memorable 1939 radio broadcast on CBS of *Ballad for Americans* responded to the question, "Who are you Mister?" with the words, "I am an American!" - his great baritone resonating in living rooms coast to coast ...

When Antonieta Gimeno, founder of the Latino Parent Association, received a Boston Neighborhood Fellows Award in 1991 and said, "I accept this award on behalf of all the brown women!" and the 150 people present, of which I was one, were moved to the marrow of their bones ...

When Georgia Nugent, the first woman President of Kenyon College, speaking from the Chautauqua lecture platform in July of 2001 said, "I'll be reading *The New York Times* and see some perfectly straightforward, simple story about someone who made a difference, sometimes against incredible odds, but who simply took that step that helped someone else, or made something possible. And I find myself immediately in tears. Those kinds of quotidian heroes, the people who can simply see how to help one another, how to take a next step, how perhaps to move us all forward a little bit, they are my heroes and they are unnamed."

But one can get carried away with too many good words. The world is a dangerous place these days. Pollyanna had her day and this is not one of them. So, we might ask how it is now possible or even thinkable to issue a 'clarion call.'

Someone I have known for a long time came up to me at a party the other night and after inquiring if all philanthropy had dried up because of the recession, and not listening to the answer, confessed to the following.

"You know since I retired I haven't done much except have a good time. We travel a lot, often make spur of the moment decisions and go off to Italy or England for a weekend or a week. Then there is the Vineyard in the summer and Puerto Rico in the winter. Did I tell you about the great deal we got at Dorado Beach last year? It was peanuts. I don't really feel guilty you know, but I wouldn't be averse to finding some non-profit or community thing. I wonder once and a while if we are being a bit too selfish but I really value not being committed to anything. It's not the money. I have the money. I wouldn't just want to write a check, if I do anything I would want to get involved.

So hey, good catching up and I'm glad to hear the charity game is still alive and kicking. Keep your eye out, will you. If you see something really interesting let me know. No promises, okay?"

If that wasn't aggravating enough, hear how the conversation turned the other evening after dinner with some neighbors, an intriguing couple, who we think of as young. The husband is a smart and successful marketing executive and his wife imports French wine. They have two teenage daughters and almost all of their life outside of these demanding careers is absorbed in parenting the kids – a not uncommon phenomenon in today's complex suburban world. I plead guilty to having fermented what followed.

"So, if you had to choose one social issue that you think is the most important in the world, what would it be? To put it another way, if you guys were to apply your imagination and creativity, of which you have a ton, to the 'world,' what would it be?"

I attempted to ignore the glare from my wife who is familiar with this gambit, but I didn't have to worry.

"Education, it is everything," our guest wife said. "I look at my girls and what it has taken to support them to this point, how hard it is, and I think of how many parents are not able to do what we can do. That is what I want to do and should do. My life is pretty selfish I guess."

"Wrong," I said. "You are simply otherwise deployed these days, and with good reason."
"Sure," said her husband, "but I think because of our culture, we are off base. In my business we play to this insatiable thirst for acquisition. That is how we make money, which is what we are motivated to do. If I were truly interested in social change of any kind, education is just one example, I would concentrate on how to take advantage of our culture. In other words, turn it toward action around an issue."

"Is that possible?" I said.

"Absolutely! Simply build on the frustration, which is really consumer frustration, that the public schools are so incredibly inefficient, are not doing the job, are subject to absurd resource allocation and unions that are out of control. The kids are not getting what they need, and the parents are paying the bills. No argument there, right? Through direct marketing, smart public relations, integration of the message into the media, TV, movies, videos, the Web, tell the story of how public education can be turned around. It's no different than what every direct marketer does everyday."

"Hmm," I said, "I wonder."

And, as we were leaving, filled with good food and even better wine, still buzzing from the conversation, he said. "I wouldn't mind, you know, taking something like that on. Let me know, will you, if you see an opportunity? You can be my agent."

"What's my commission?" I said, and we all laughed.

But the final 'straw' so to speak, and the reason I am writing this piece came from a conversation with a close friend, someone who loves to make the counter argument and usually manages to be wise, sardonic and funny all at once. That night, however, he was more troubled and discouraged. "What about our country? What's happening? This tax cut makes no sense at all, and the implications from the War in Iraq have been vastly understated. You know democracy has never worked over the long term. America is an anomaly and we are on the verge of losing it. You can't let pluralism rule the day without risking anarchy. Where is the sense of balance? You can't let the right, religious or otherwise, never mind the liberal left, dominate to this extent. Don't kid yourself that it couldn't happen here - this society is very vulnerable. Look what has happened around the world in these desperately poor countries. The U.S. version of democracy can't work there and yet we continue to pour resources into infrastructures that are inadequate to handle them. This new AIDS support is just one example. It is incomprehensible to me that our leaders believe we can bully and rule the world and at the same time ignore the underlying economic, environmental, health and political realities. This has become a game of Russian Roulette. Let me tell you, I am not optimistic. History reminds us that, despite what may be our very best efforts, we may well regress to the mean like others before us.

"At the same time I think many of us, certainly many of my friends, are each doing, in our own way, important and constructive things. SS-- is serving children and building an organization to serve them in Myanmar. M-- is a teacher and volunteer. J-- is a player in the global environmental movement. H-- is doing her best to single-handedly green Boston while her

buddy MC-- has built and sustained a theatre company. My colleague A-- is having a big effect on management education in China and Singapore. And I do what I can.

"In the end, I think we are lucky to have the opportunity to be so usefully engaged. Many of the world's troubles arise from those who do not perceive themselves as having such constructive opportunities, or are persuaded that their opportunity is to blow themselves up or to kill others. Terrorism is an occupation of last resort. (To be more precise those folks are also answering a clarion call to action and choosing among the opportunities available to them).

I believe that those around our 'table' have indeed been fortunate to be able to do their part to keep our run going. Could we be doing better? Maybe."

Then the next morning in the Sunday New York Times were these lines from Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, when Edmund with alcoholic talkativeness says: "Then the moment of ecstatic freedom came. The peace, the end of the quest, then the last harbor, the joy of belonging to a fulfillment beyond men's lousy, pitiful, greedy fears and hopes and dreams!

For a second you see – and seeing the secret, are the secret. For a second there is meaning! Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone, lost in the fog again, and you stumble on toward nowhere, for no good reason!"

Edmund is not the only one who swings from moments of hope to those of despair but he is clearly one who could have done a lot 'better'. I think of these little vignettes, the bits and pieces of conversations, as waypoints on a charted journey. The one that we navigate whether we like it or not. And you, my unknown reader, the one for whom this piece is written, where are you on your journey? Are you ready to come in from the cold? Ready to join the brotherhood and sisterhood of those who sit around the warm stove, dry and safe from the fog? It is the journey that Hart Crane described in his poem *Voyages*, "The bottom of the sea is cruel... And yet this great wink of eternity...The seal's wide spindrift gaze toward paradise."

Of course, a hard-nosed serious clarion call would never presume to use the word paradise. Yet, as this particular call goes out, still in search of a certain you, my unknown reader, I wonder what is holding you back, what wonderful things you might accomplish, how good you would feel if you simply tried, and what other words to use.