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The Miracle That is a Conversation

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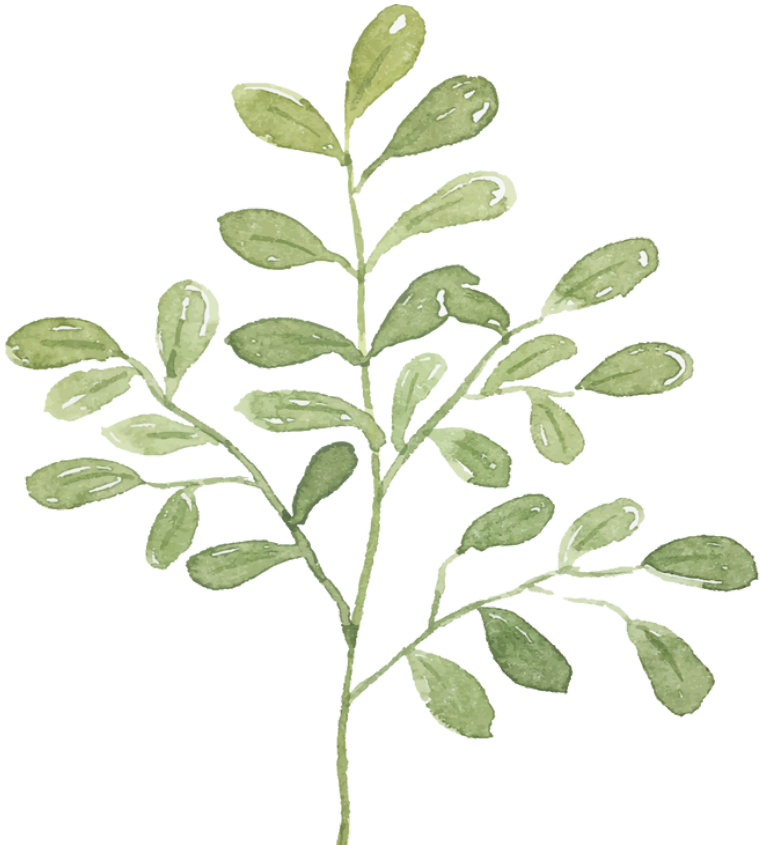

Twenty-five years ago,

collective worry of humankind was the Y2K bug. We thought an earlier computer-programming decision, which was meant to optimize digit size for dates to two slots, may spoil our New Year's Eve party when computer systems went from '99' for 1999 to '00' for 2000, and dent our otherwise jubilant start to what was destined to be a great millennium. Humanity was assumed to solve its grand disagreements and to be capable of managing minor conflicts in Africa, Balkans, and the Near East. Sooner or later, everyone would be some colourful version of a Chardonnay-sipping moderate. We were poised to reap the peace dividend, and live happily ever after.

Yet, the world that followed did not unfold as expected. Instead of a global convergence toward moderation and shared prosperity, we have witnessed increasing polarization, distrust, and fragmentation. Just in the last 10 years, we have seen a U.S. Secretary of Defence name internal divisions in the United States—and not relations with China, ISIS, or Russia—as the thing which keeps him up at night. A survey found a fictional and murderous President Underwood of the House of Cards to be more popular than President Obama. Another survey found that significant portion of Americans suspected Bill Gates, someone who has been warning and preparing the world about a possible pandemic through his words and deeds, for the COVID pandemic. If you are inclined to assume that these challenges are somehow particular to the United States, you may wish to recall that President Macron chose to close down his own alma mater, ENA, to appease his critics; and that the country most adamant about open markets for the last two centuries, the UK, chose to leave the largest common market in the world, all in the last 10 years.

This spectacular myopia turns an audit of our edifice not into a choice but into an imperative. In this monograph I will sketch the cracks I have come across with the knowledge that it is not—cannot possibly be—an exhaustive scan. Both my diagnosis and proposed remedy are subjective. I present five broad theses:

Fraternité Overlooked:

As we all may recall easily, the French revolution had three slogans, Liberté, Égalité, and Fraternité. Since then, we have had extensive debate on and attention to freedom and equality, but the third turned out to be the neglected, overlooked dimension. A more apt term for fraternité may be camaraderie, itself a derivate of camara, the Latin term for room or space. As such, camaraderie is the end result of sharing a common space over an extended period of time. It is what we hope and expect will result from being cohabitants of a shared space. Camaraderie is both a result but also the root of fellowship.

The question, then, is whether we in fact share any common space. There has been, in the United States, a process described as the big sorting. People increasingly live in areas where one of the two political parties are uncontested or clearly dominant. By one count, in 2016, 60% of the Americans lived in districts where one of the presidential candidates won by a landslide, up from 27% in 1976. A recent Pew study finds that only 8% of the electoral districts are "mixed-party" districts, where no single party were predominant. Jon Yates has calculated that an average professional in the UK would need to invite 100 people to her party before someone who is unemployed makes the list. It may be that we do not co-habit the same space and do not face commensurate predicaments. Data shows that even within a city like London, there could be as much as 12 years difference in the healthy years of life expectancy between the residents of different boroughs within the same city. E pluribus unum may be as unintelligible as a statement as it is as a feeling. There seems to be at least two somewhat distinct sides to the centrifugal dynamic. The first is the physical sorting; but the second has a more temperamental side: we are not interested in each other, and may even have what could be described as mild disdain for each other. The latter phenomenon finds a striking account in David Goodhart's *The Road To Somewhere*. Goodhart sketches two different profiles: Anywheres are successful at schools, and have professional careers. Their achieved identities are portable, and they are indeed mobile. They feel they can make it anywhere and this vantage point seeps into their understanding of worth. Somewheres are more rooted, and their identities are a function of belonging somewhere and belonging well. As Branko Milanovich's now well-known elephant graph has vividly demonstrated, they have not reaped much benefit from globalization. Simultaneously, what Goodhart describes as the progressive individualism of the Anywheres has devalued their sociocultural capital. Goodhart reports to have written his book because he disagrees with the conceited self-righteousness of the Anywheres, and because he wants to rehabilitate the decency of the Somewheres and their outlook. In an important corollary, Goodhart's following book *Head, Hand, Heart* sets out to correct what he perceives -rightfully in my opinion- as over-valuation of the cerebral competencies, and the under-valuation of the mastery of hand and heart achieves. Others have been less gentle with Goodhart's Anywheres; Michael Lind chooses to describe this particular cleavage as a new class warfare.

Pippa Norris, in turn, has a more subdued account in *Cultural Backlash*, which is nevertheless a warning against focusing just on socioeconomic variables and underestimating the very real sociocultural devaluation experienced in large sections of the Western world. The difference between socioeconomic and sociocultural drivers is not a pedantic

nuance. Most progressives seem to be concerned exclusively about the former. Rationale for that choice is not clear to me, as is the failure to distinguish between opposition to *speed* of change versus direction of change. It should be perfectly plausible to be unopposed to the *direction* of change while being sceptical about the current speed of change. After all, its was Goethe who talked about *veloziferisch* and warned about how rushed industrialization, rapid communication and social rhythms were hampering the organic -and therefore slow-cultural/moral bildung.

Immense fragmentation of the media ecosystem also contributes to the erosion of camaraderie. First satellite broadcasting, then the internet, and of course the current social media landscape has made sure that we do not learn and know together. The graphic account of Benedict Anderson regarding everyone reading their morning newspapers and as such having separate experiences but still feel part of the same community has all but evaporated. The frictionless change of terminology from social networks to social media is itself highly suspect; with that verbal legerdemain instrumentalization and monetization of our interactions as peers suddenly became unproblematic. It is impossible to forget the disclosure by Sean Parker, the founding president of Facebook: 'We are exploiting vulnerabilities in human psychology to get as much of your time and conscious attention as possible'. There is also what a Cambridge Analytica whistleblower described as whispering something different to everyone's ears and as such dismantling the society as part of a malign project to mould it to your sinister plans. Some have found availability of good public service broadcasters to be a significant brake against fragmentation and polarization in those countries.

One sign of our dominant blind spot for camaraderie is our seamless use of networks and communities as interchangeable words. Whereas both entail connections between people, communities come with some minimal care element while networks have no endemic care quality. Our unreflective use of network in lieu of community should bother all of us.

Nicolas Epley at University of Chicago demonstrated that we are "undersocial," meaning when nudged to start an unsolicited good faith conversation, both parties end up feeling much more content than they anticipated at the outset. This finding is significant because, as Peter Levine of Tufts University warns us, both social capital and our civic habits suffer not from over use but from under use. Building and sustaining our wherewithal to comanage our common public life is a muscle, and like all muscles it takes effort and attention, neither of which are cheap or easy. Yet, crucially what is even more expensive is neglecting this skill. Professors Erica Chenoweth and Julia Minson argue that our ideological foes are rarely as crazy as we imagine them

to be, which should lead us to wonder whether we loath our compatriots because we do not engage them enough. Guys Itzcohov's research demonstrates that people who feel heard are willing and ready to listen more and better. Vuslat Foundation has long argued that listening generously with the intent to understand rather than to merely and swiftly respond, presents us with a virtuous circle. When we listen generously, we are more likely to understand our counterpart who in turn feels heard and heeded and is inclined to give us the benefit of the doubt. Hopefully all these years of neglecting camaraderie have paved the way to for some formidable thirst and through that delayed and compounded gratification we find something that is not just a chore but a delight.

I need to add that although I care deeply about the need to resuscitate camaraderie, I am not swayed by the likes of Rutger Bregman's *Humankind: A Hopeful History* and Nicholas A. Christakis' *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society*. It is commendable that these authors take on overly pessimistic accounts of our beastly nature, but if we also are not explicit and honest about the costs of sustaining decency, we simply pave the road to the next round of disappointments. Decency is anything but automatic or default, and as such it needs and deserves continuous care and our willingness to make courageous decisions around trade-offs and be partial towards its maintenance.

Goodwill Neglected:

Camaraderie and fraternity were not the only things we ignored or undervalued. Importance of trust and goodwill were also in that category of benign neglect. Too often, transactionalism -and the narrow and shallow rationality it represents- demand and expect to be accepted as the only option. After all, did Adam Smith not advise all of us to secure our supper by appealing to the self-interest of the grocer and the butcher, and not to their compassion? Nobel laureate Milton Friedman did opine that greed is just fine. Companies look for people with sufficient killer instincts when they need to expand their sales force. Economists categorize generous behavior as lingering shadows from a bygone age leading to big mistakes and maladaptive choices. Celebrity sport coaches argue that a graceful loser is a loser per se. International relations experts in the U.S. lament the fact that American people do not want raw power and prefer it to be sautéed in moral purpose. If you heed these voices, we would see no role for trust or goodwill, and would only look for them in museums and fairy tales.

Yet, the deep pool of our perennial knowhow tells us a different story. When the Chinese sage, Confucius, was asked by his students what three key elements were essential for a community, his answer included food, security, and trust. His inquisitive students then pressed him to give up on two and wondered what he would retain as absolutely vital,

and Analects tell us that trust turned out to be the non-negotiable element. The reasoning seems to be that while the temporary absence of food or security can be remedied and those things can be resupplied when trust and goodwill exist, if trust is gone then resupply of food or security is impossible, and the community is doomed. If Confucius is too quixotic for you, multiple recent studies confirm the relationship between trust and socio-economic wellbeing.

We could also recall that Benjamin Franklin was solicited to help a compatriot in dire straits, Benjamin Webb. Franklin reportedly pondered the request for couple of days and sent Webb the requested amount along with a letter specifying that the enclosed check was not a grant, but a loan. The repayment of the loan was not to be directed to Franklin, but to a compatriot who might be in a commensurate duress and under the same rules of paying it forward. Franklin, as you may recall, was also the inventor of the lending library as a place to not only store but loan books. In both cases, Franklin is making supplying and actively maintaining a web of trust as a key feature of the new American society. And yet this episode is not featured in Walter Isaacson's substantial book on Franklin. Isaacson seems to share the contemporary disdain for camaraderie, trust, and what it takes to sustain such horizontal sensibilities. Other geniuses he has profiled in other voluminous books such as Da Vinci, Jobs, et al. are supposed to proudly have reaches which exceed their grasps. We shall return to how our diagnosis about ourselves are the products of suboptimal genealogies.

Some decades ago, Robert Axelrod, later to become President of the American Political Science Association, set out to explore whether cooperation was possible in a world of egoists and without any central authority. He invited strategists, game theorists and other interested parties to come up with the most successful way to navigate a dilemma where it is wiser to cooperate if you trust your partner, but you also do not want to be a naïve sucker. In the first tournament, the simple strategy of starting with being a decent person and then reciprocating what your counterpart did, won over other more cunning and complicated strategies. We could chalk this up to naivete or inexperience, but Axelrod organized other tournaments where the success of the simple and decent strategy was known to all participants, yet still no amount of cunning could produce higher returns in the long run. This was due to the fact that when enough decent people had rewarding interactions with each other, their patterns of cooperation proved stable, resilient and norm-setting for all. Axelrod continued to test this staggering result under various scenarios and one of the challenges was noise; that is what if we were decent, but our intentions were simply misunderstood and that misunderstanding triggered a chain of retaliation which left us at a lower level than where we could be? It is there that Axelrod felt the need to introduce generosity, namely that we would be well

advised not to take offense easily and give up on our peers prematurely.

Axelrod's experiments and account on the evolution of cooperation has one important tenet which should not be overlooked: The simple strategy of starting with decency and reciprocating the actions of our peer overperforms *over the long run*, and is not immune to short term costs. As such, our staying the course is dependent on tomorrow being not too different from today. Yet if there is too much change, our incentive to view tomorrow as another version of today decreases, while the premium we attach to one off gains increases. We also need to be mindful of the fact that the *median* American household has $8,000 in their various bank accounts. This is an extraordinarily low buffer for life's exigencies. This cannot be unrelated to Goodhart's Somewheres being less enthusiastic about relentless change, or Goethe's *veloziferisch*. We need to entertain the possibility that their distaste for too rapid a change is in fact a civic minded response. I cannot not mention two works which do a commendable of resuscitating the goodness of ordinary people: Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind: Why **Good** People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, and *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of **Good** People* by Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald. Both works resist the temptation for early judgement and provide us with excellent reasons to do the same.

Let's consider for a minute the way we greet each other. Greeting is something we do automatically and without much thought, and yet it holds vital clues. Greetings across the three Abrahamic faiths have one important, common feature: Assalamu alaykum, Pax vobis, and Shalom aleichem all mean "I come in peace," respectively in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Incidentally, the military salute is based on a convention to show that one is not bearing any weapons, and therefore, comes in peace. The practice of shaking hands is presumed to be based on a similar intent of demonstrating that parties bear no arms and mean no evil. In South Asia, Namaste means "I revere you" and is reciprocated with the same words. In South Africa, Sawubona means "I see you." Mayans are said to greet each other by literally saying "I am another you." Followers of the 13th century sage Rumi are known not to open their gates, if the person at the door replied "It is me" when asked who is at the door. The conscientious answer worthy of admission would need to be "It is you". These common traits are important and telling. It seems that humanity has decided that the way to start an interaction is to confirm that all parties to the interaction are bearers of recognition and respect, and that harm will not be part of that encounter. That is, in a sense, the Da Vinci Code embedded in our greetings. Possibly due that code, a member of the public felt compelled to ask both candidates for the US presidency in 2016 to say something positive about each other in a profoundly cathartic moment.

Such a code makes sense, if we take a long-term view. We did not always greet strangers in this manner. In his book, The World Until Yesterday, Jared Diamond describes the world of our tribal ancestors. In that world, people were divided into three categories: friends, enemies, and strangers. Friends and enemies are relatively straight forward; how to deal with strangers is the critical question. Diamond demonstrates that strangers were treated essentially as enemies, as there were no benign reasons for you to encounter a stranger. It looks like we started out in a world where we assumed most strangers were enemies. We evolved into more complex social and geographical arrangements, where we could not afford to assume that all strangers were malign, because we needed their cooperation and engagement. Our conventions of greeting evolved as a response to this predicament. This is after all what Kant, the quintessential Enlightenment thinker, described as the right to hospitality, namely nobody can be treated as an enemy just because she or he is not known to us. In other words, everyone is entitled to an initial assumption of goodwill. Our world is built on the assumption of the alien as a probable friend until proven otherwise. Yet classifying this assumption as a right may have inadvertently diluted our responsibility in building and sustaining an ecosystem for such camaraderie.

Philosopher Byung-Chul Han laments the waning of ritual which, he argues, writes the rules of the community into the body, and adds that we have gone too far on the path of disenchantment. By subordinating everything to economic imperatives and allowing an overly narcissistic model, community without communication—made possible in part through customs and rituals—has been replaced by communication without community. Byung-Chul Han is keen to describe listening not as a passive state but an active one which inspires the other to narrate and opens up a space where the narrator feels heard and even loved.

Contemporary social science supports these perennial wells of wisdom. Difficult Conversations Lab at Columbia University discovered that we do not heed criticism coming our way unless it is preceded by three distinct positive statements. In other words, establishing goodwill is constitutive and essential to being heeded. Elisabeth Oldfield of Theos and The Sacred, who has facilitated several seminal conversations, accounts her conclusions in the following manner: ‘Not only the medium is the message but also the messenger is the message. We are inclined to hear people who remind us of our selves and speak as if they respect us or might respect us if they met us. If we sense any hint of contempt or disdain, we treat that person as a foe. People do not care what you know until they know what you care. No one will listen to you unless they have the impression that you may listen to them. So much of our public deliberations fail because so many are convinced that if

they just scold the other party hard enough, they will change.' She adds that we are uprooted, globalized and scattered to the wind, and warns that knowing how to do long-term covenants, loving relationship with more than a few people is a skill we need to learn because that does not happen by accident. After several decades of working on encounters and better conversations, my conclusions are eerily similar.

Anthropologists, in turn, have identified ubiquitous practices around gift giving as one manner where so many of us signal that what is at work is not a narrowly transactional relationship. We give gifts and may hope to receive gifts in return, but there is no immediacy or guarantees for a return gift, and the gift says we are OK with that because we value long term wellbeing over immediate returns. Others such as Dutch historian Johan Huizinga has demonstrated the centrality of play, its civilizing functions as initiation, rehearsal and experimentation for life. There is of course competition and contest in all forms of good play, but these are couched in thick fabrics of bonhomie and fair play. In play, there is never doubt that trust and camaraderie can be assumed. The mighty tech sector was one of the actors who overlooked the role of trust and was determined for a long time to move fast and break things, and yet the Media Lab at MIT now proposes "to scale at the speed of trust." Better late than never, one could say.

Interdependence Spurned:

A related but also distinct facet of neglecting camaraderie and goodwill is a particular disdain about interdependence. We have some elegant accounts of this paradigm in Joseph Henrich's book, The WEIRDest People: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous. Henrich demonstrates with abundant data how our assumptions are based on individualistic or atomistic units. It is a bit less in continental Europe and more accentuated in the English-speaking world, but the basic distinction is there nevertheless. An earlier work by Richard Nisbett, The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... And Why, had similar conclusions. A particular discomfort with interdependence is intrinsic to this model. Yet, it is impossible to write the story of humankind without acknowledging at the outset our central ties to the social and natural ecologies we inhabit, and inquire how best we can thrive given our constitutive interdependence. A recent cluster of articles, fortunately, heralds a new framework: The self is not singular but a fluid network; you're not a computer or a machine but a tiny stone in a beautiful mosaic.

Tu WeiMing of Harvard and Peking universities has always maintained all of life is encounters, and therefore relational. Every act is already relational; the object of the act helps define the subject through response, reciprocity,

even silent presence. As such, participants co-author outcomes. Society is held together less by contract than by mutual trust, a crucial observation which we cannot overlook.

150 years ago, Chief Seattle had a similar message: “We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the dew in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man all belong to the same family. The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also received his last sigh. The wind also gives our children the spirit of life. The earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.” Rather than embracing this interdependence, we have too often treated it as an imposition—something to be resisted rather than nurtured. More recently, anthropologist Clifford Geertz, sociologist Richard Sennett, psychologist Michael Tomasello, historian Yuval Harari, political scientist Robert Putnam, neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist, and biologist Merlin Sheldrake patched together a formidable account of “we.” We will see whether or not their voices will be heeded this time around.

If we are not clearly and conclusively delineated units, then how best are we to engage with others? Clearly not as a homo economicus maximizing our personal gain. 30+ years of the ultimatum game experiment demonstrates that we are anything but a variant of homo economicus. In this particular experiment, two people are given $100, and one of them gets to propose a split to the other. The second person has no say in what the split should be, hence the ultimatum. The second person can either accept the split and they each get their proposed share, or s/he can reject the split in which case they both receive nothing. If one has a dim view of humanity, the rational split would need to be 99-1. It cannot be 100-0 because those in the second position would have no reason to accept the offer, but one does not need to be more generous than a 99-1 split since $1 is more than what the person in the second position had a moment ago and s/he would be foolish to reject the offer as s/he has no other objective than maximizing personal gain. And yet the average split around the world regardless of country is 55-45. Furthermore, we see that offers more stingy than 75-25 are routinely rejected by those in the second position, which is interesting and begs an explanation: why did those people in the second position not accept even one—let alone 25—dollar, as that is better than nothing? It turns out that we have a real commitment to fairness and are willing to pay a personal price to uphold fairness and an ethics of reciprocity, which would only make sense if we are indeed constitutionally interdependent beings. A survey by the organization

World Public Opinion shows that when given the option between "our nation should consistently follow international law; it is wrong to violate international law" and "If our government thinks it is not in our nation's interest, it should not feel obliged to abide by international laws," 57 percent of people in 21 countries choose compliance with international law and 35 percent choose national opting out. It is difficult to overstate the significance of siding with compliance with international law even when one's governments deem it to be against the national interest. The same survey also showed how people systematically underestimate to what a large extent their own multilateralist preferences are shared by their compatriots, and feel solitary in their support for international law. In other words, after decades of disappointment and abundant supply of advice to be calculating, selfish and greedy, decent people seem not to have relented. The fact that dominant meta narratives do not enable them to realize that they form majorities in their countries and in the world can be chalked up under the accomplishment of hegemonic discourse or under the to-do list of those who believe that an alternative is necessary and feasible.

Rumi had an answer to how best to live interdependently, and described love as the essential bridge between us and everything else. Turks still use to this day a frequent lament, "Aşk Olsun (If only there was love)", which serves as short hand for a belief that the subpar state of affairs would not have occurred if there was love. The statement never applies to romantic affairs and is always for routine daily interactions. The sensibility here may be related to what ever-thoughtful Byung Chul Han refers as "original freinliness". Remarkable Irish poet, John Odonahue, also noted that love is the only light which allows us to see the individuality and the soul of the other. If these strike you as statements by poets prone to embellishment, you may want to recall that love—or rather agape—was profoundly central to the civil rights movement. Today, the history of that movement is narrated by those with a keen eye towards strategic litigation and communication, and yet that narration happens at the expense of overlooking a profound ethos. Martin Luther King described agape, the ancient Greek word that the Bible used for love, as distinct from eros or philia. Agape is goodwill for all, a temperament based on magnanimity which requires us not to give up on people doing evil deeds, even while despising the deed itself. After the firebombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church which left three 14-year-old girls dead, it was agape which moved MLK to declare he would not give up on his white brothers and on the possibility of even the most misguided to "learn to respect the dignity and the worth of all." In a recent book, renowned scholar of civics, Peter Levine, argued that for John Lewis, MLK and company, agape was not a tactic at all but a stern creed which demanded that their opponents not be overpowered or annihilated but won over as fellows to jointly build a better

tomorrow. Zoran Dindic, a courageous man cut from the same cloth as MLK and a student of Habermas, reportedly told his colleagues intent on proving that another Serbia was possible that they would have triumphed only when they see a man -and by implication his humanity- and not a police -a narrow sliver of his identity and potential- when they encounter a policeman. Kumi Naidoo, a tireless warrior for justice and decency, demands that we love the people who voted for our enemies, and argues that if we fail to find their humanity, that is our fault and not theirs. We might recall how the tremendous courage around the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa was built on the ubuntu philosophy, which is akin to the inclusive goodwill that MLK described. Ubuntu argues that I am because you are, and you are because we are. In other words, we are deeply and thoroughly intertwined, and we are authors of each other's destinies.

Cultures around the world told, re-told and re-formed this basic thesis over and over. If any additional proof is needed, we can recall how several cultures, certainly Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Taoist creeds, and sages from Cicero to Tagore, have pointed to the elderly planting trees whose shades they know they will not enjoy as the telltale sign of a mature society. It is not insignificant that many today neither possess popular knowledge of this diagnosis nor an understanding of its rationale. As so few know or recall Plotinus or Cincinnatus, rarely anyone would remember Burke's account of a healthy society as "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are dead, and those who are to be born." I would argue that the elderly planting trees or more precisely contributing and growing the commons makes sense if we are to understand our own existence as a process, at the beginning of which we are dependent—and indebted—to those older than us for care and affection, and we pay back that debt not to those who cared for us but those who are younger than us by planting trees whose shade we know we will not enjoy. We are not and cannot be merely transactional beings.

We may also recall that both Ataturk and Gandhi spoke the language of responsibility as well as rights, as the Turkish and Indian republics were getting off the ground. Republics have sometimes been described as aristocracy of everyone. Since we are more inclined to view aristocracy as a system of decadent privilege, we view movement from monarchy to a republic - or democratization in general- as expanding privilege to larger groups and hopefully to all. Yet expanding privilege without expanding responsibility is unlikely to be rewarding, and most certainly not sustainable. Today, we are more comfortable with the language of rights and tend to treat responsibility as a chore. Responsibility, however, is a derivative of response, in several languages including Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Indonesian, Italian, Persian, Swahili, Turkish, and Urdu.

Responsibility means we see our peers as our equals capable of and entitled to passing judgement on us. Ataturk wrote in a 1931 book on civics that the founders and the real owners of the republic were free and responsible citizens. When the Ottoman public found unsatisfactory, a peace treaty signed by the Sultan at the end of World War I, cities and towns of any substance spontaneously held civic conventions, formed militias, imposed levies and donated arms to a national armed force in a manner not too different from veteran political scientist Filippo Sabetti's account of citizens as the artisans of the common, civic life in communes from "from Flanders to Sicily and from Castile to Germany". They were responsible because they were—and wanted to stay—free, and were free because they were—and continued to be—responsible. Sadly, this and other associated temperaments have also been pasteurized out of our current vocabulary and thinking.

Selective Genealogy:

So far, I have posited that we have neglected fraternity, and that this negligence was ill advised and unhelpful. I have further argued that neglect coincided with overlooking the importance of goodwill, trust, and camaraderie. I also claimed that this effective paradigm ignored our constitutionally interdependent nature. Marshall Sahlins had a tough diagnosis on all this: Western society has been built on a perverse and mistaken idea of human nature… "Sorry, beg your pardon."

It is safe to say our neglect did not arise in a vacuum. It is the product of a particular historical imagination—one that has elevated certain features and stories while erasing others. As such, it may be necessary to further unpack the dominant story arc which left us with this myopia, and ascertain whether Sahlins' harsh conclusion is inevitable.

I happen to be old enough to have listened to accounts of Western colonialism being described at U.S. public high schools as a civilizing mission and as white man's burden, and I still find zombie remnants of that metanarrative about what the West is and how it got to be that way. One powerful and telling meta narrative about what constituted the West, was the canonical Plato-to-NATO courses in elite universities, and their trickle-down iterations throughout the root and branch of our cultural ecosystem. Western civilization, according to this story, was a teleological path towards democracy, capitalism, science, individual autonomy, and human rights. The most important stages of Western evolution were ancient Greece, Rome, the synthesis of classical civilization and Christianity, the European Renaissance and the voyages of discovery, the rise of modern science, and, in the last two centuries, the rise of modern liberal democracy, the spread of capitalist prosperity, and, with the end of the Cold War, the convergence of the rest with the West. By looking at the past mainly to find the origins of this manifest present, the storytellers of this meta narrative had to omit features not compatible with this glorious march

towards the modern liberal West.

The favourite Greek in the Grand Narrative was the philosopher Socrates, who appeared as the inventor of moral individualism, that is, of the idea that it was the duty of the individual to make his own discovery of what right action entailed. Socrates was of course, as the first victim of populist resistance to bold ideas, the first martyr for truth and freedom of expression. In the year 399 B.C., he was tried and executed for blasphemy. The Grand Narrative skated lightly over the following centuries; unless you are a nerd, you would not come across, for example, Plotinus and discover his multiple connections outside "the West." The next milestone was the voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492 and his discovery of America. This came at the high point of the Renaissance, considered by the Grand Narrative as the reawakening of Europe after a millennium of ignorance. No one tells us about the Arawaks, what happened to them or that Renaissance was considered a paradigmatic revolution only in the 19th century and not before.

The Atlantic Charter of 1941 is critical juncture for the Plato-to-NATO sequence. In August 1941, the American president, Franklin Roosevelt, and the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, met on a U.S. Navy ship off Newfoundland, where they issued a joint declaration that became known as the Atlantic Charter, and defined the identity of the modern West as a set of political and economic norms, and as goals that ought to be, and were, shared by all sensible people. The Atlantic Charter defined Western civilization, and proclaimed that the purpose of WW2 effort was to secure that civilization and extend its benefits. After 1945, generations of university students internalized the story arc. The rest is history.

In an interesting twist, Marxism, the dominant nemesis of the liberal meta narrative for more than a century, had commensurate blind spots. Marxism believed in class struggle as the main mover of history. As a product of the 19th century, Marx had profound faith in progress and positivism. His tombstone reminds his visitors while others before him aimed to understand the world, his goal was to change it. Marx had no patience for what he considered utopian communitarianism of alternative visions concerning the good and the just. This is why he supported British colonialism in India as a force for good. As such, we cannot be surprised that German Marxists collaborated with the National Socialists in undermining the Weimer Republic or that the Indian Marxists continue to despise the Green Revolution for precluding the swift ripening of the class conflict by decreasing the misery of Indian peasantry. When conflict is not only inevitable but also beneficial, then one would be ill advised to value camaraderie and cherish conversations as worthwhile means to co-manage the commons.

The pasteurized and coarse meta narrative of Plato-to-NATO—and its main rival, Marxism—ignored the endemic

richness of the Western trajectory, where for every Adam Smith we have a Thomas Paine, an Elinor Ostrom for every Milton Friedman, and a Cincinnatus for every Ceasar. We have a system which ensures that all pupils hear about power thirsty Ceasar, but hardly any one knows about power averse and virtuous Cincinnatus, let alone discover a very real line from Cincinnatus to George Washington or Nelson Mandela. In 16th century, Raphael and his patron the Pope Julius II felt Diogenes, who two millennia earlier deemed mighty Alexander had nothing to offer to him, was endemic to The School of Athens and the 16th century genealogy of the West, but 21st century has no recollection of or role for Cincinnatus, unless you are Edward Snowden, which significant in and of itself. Similarly, one needs to be a rare nerd to realize that Thomas Paine argued already in 18th century that the political revolutions in America and France will not be complete unless it was accompanied by certain vital features of what he called agrarian democracy where citizens are provided significant grants when they turn 21, and start out in life with an asset as opposed to liabilities which encumber their liberties. It should be noted that Bruce Ackerman argues for a similar scheme in his Stakeholder Society where the grant is $250,000 and where the needed revenue is provided by a 2% annual wealth tax. Elinor Ostrom, a Nobel Laureate like Milton Friedman, sketched how thriving societies managed to govern their commons as responsible peers and without a leviathan, thus negating the tragedy of the commons thesis, which is still with us as a zombie meme. Descartes might have sought absolute certainty and have settled on Cogito Ergo Sum as the one certain fact, but not only his contemporary Spinoza pursued a dramatically different track, but Rilke, who advised us to cherish and live the question as opposed to settling for sham certainty, was also very much part of the Western genealogy. Rilke's other proposition was to sustain a porous ego. Less well-known Martin Buber noted that all real living was relational and was about encounters. He thought cogito ergo sum was childish and naïve. Machiavelli may have advised that it was better to be feared than to be loved, but King Arthur's motto was that we remain free by serving each other and Abraham Lincoln wished to know better anyone whom he did not like, both suggesting a robust code of fellowship and camaraderie. Lincoln, of course, opposed calls for mass disenfranchisement of Confederate soldiers. Herbert Spencer may have believed in the survival of the fittest, but Goethe went to extraordinary lengths to understand the Other, not to dominate but to honour as a peer. For every crass Dallas, we had a Little House on the Prairie with ubiquitous bonhomie…we should also not forget that Tocqueville famously observe Americans often acted more communally, generously, and responsibly than their overt individualistic ideology would predict. For every immodest Thomas Friedman, there is a deeply curious David Brooks. Adrian Vermeule

of Harvard may lust for power, but Krista Tippett, a Yale alumna, is equally interested in wisdom, compassion and the craft of living well. Courageous Ursula Le Guin should not be overshadowed by feral Ayn Rand. For every blustering Donald Trump, we can and did produce a gracious Jacinda Ardern. We forget that Magna Carta Libertatum went in hand with the contemporaneous Charter of the Forests, which enshrined the commons and commoners' access to the commons as key to a healthy society, a Charter read out four times a year in public gatherings for centuries, so that no one dare forget and override its tenets. Nordic societies still have allemansratten very much in practice and occasionally in their laws. Allemansratten allows people to walk even into private property unimpeded; roam freely; collect berries if that is what you wish to do; and camp provided that you are not intrusively close to the lawful residents. To this day, the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish royal families live in dwellings with no fences.

The problem with the Plato-to-Nato storyline in particular, and other teleological accounts in general, is that they pasteurized the endemic richness of the Western story, treat the current status quo as the only viable option, and allow no space for alternate imaginaries. That constitutes a deep injustice to both the past and the future. We undoubtedly possess the capacity to change tracks, reassess our genealogy, and retell our story. The question is whether we have the requisite courage and curiosity.

Inadequate Conversations and Listening:

If we had a more accurate understanding of what makes us human and capable of flourishing; if we had a fuller account us what got us here; if we were more cognizant of the fundamental fact that we were constitutionally interdependent; if we had not forgotten the value of camaraderie, trust, and the goodwill, the one human activity we would not do without would be a wholesome conversation.

I am, among other things, the Director of a School of Politics in Istanbul, and one feature of that role is to convene meetings with our participants with European policy makers and various luminaries. In one such meeting, our participants were asked to advise their European hosts on how best to approach Turkey's ruler, Erdoğan, perceived to be increasingly autocratic and difficult. The first and rather seminal suggestion was to have a conversation with him. The term that the Turks use for conversation is muhabbet, the root of which is the Arabic words for love and friendship. So more than conversation in English, muhabbet in Turkish has connotations and expectations of goodwill. Also, in English and several Romance languages, often overlooked etymology of conversation (con+verse) points to changing together. Changing together does not mean convergence, but it does assume that parties to a good conversation are not immune to being altered by each other.

Ever-perceptive Theodore Zeldin writes in Conversation that a willingness for -or at least absence of a stubborn opposition to- emerging a slightly different person is the telltale sign of a good conversation. In that sense, debate is not conversation since no self-respecting party in a debate would ever admit hearing a new and consequential thing from their rival, which would lead them to reassess their point of view. Parties in a debate are finished products the moment they start the debate, whereas parties to a good conversation are increasingly permeable to each other. Thích Nhất Hạnh is one of the sages who insist that we do not know how to listen, meaning that what we usually call "listening" is hurried, judgmental, or self-centered, rather than the kind of deep, compassionate attention that can transform relationships. In Reclaiming Conversation, Sherry Turkle describes conversation as leading to intellectual communion, where boundaries are rendered porous. A good conversation dissipates hierarchies and, as such, is a seminal site of relational equality as described by philosopher Elisabeth Anderson. Relational equality is also a key feature in Hegel's master-slave dialectics. Master seems to get his will but while he gets submission, he does not get recognition which he needs -almost craves- from an equal. The vicious cycle continues if the slave -after liberation- acts according to the only modus operandi he has known and seeks domination. Only a good faith conversation and the ethos around such practice holds the key to mutual liberation.

We might wish to recall that while the generally accepted text of the New Testament notes that "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God", at least one learned scholar of that text, Erasmus, chose a different rendition: "In the beginning was the conversation", a thesis which would make conversation not only seminal but also deeply potent. We know through Erasmus' letters that he valued the civilizing effect of colloquium, the most frequently used term in Latin for conversation, and had rules for this mutually enriching social practice: be cordial, don't disparage or belittle any one, or boast or put on air.

There are recent studies which capture an interesting visceral synchronicity between parties to a good conversation. It should also be noted that there is increasing evidence that listening well and asking open-ended questions work much better than conventional hard-sell tactics of persuasion.

One structural challenge is the current ratio of transactions to conversations. For most of our history, we had ample conversations. We convened around the fire and exchanged stories at the end of the day. Participants, sitting around a circle, knew that their turn would come and they would have the attention of their peers. Whatever transactions we had were embedded in a thick web woven by these conversations.

It might be helpful to recall that the term company comes from eating bread together (com+panis). Today, we have immense number of transactions and few conversations. Globalization as ever accelerating movement of capital and goods may, in that sense, represent a step away from, and not toward, a desirable constellation of capabilities and sensibilities. It should not come as a surprise that people, feeling unheeded and outpaced, are not that discriminate in their search for brakes of any kind. Conscience means—both etymologically and practically—knowing together. Without a conversation, we cannot know together, and without an intersubjective normative framework, we cannot proceed. If we do, a feral terminus is inevitable.

Late David Graeber reports in his last book, The Dawn of Everything, on a little-known reaction of indigenous people of North America such as the Wendat/Huron to the French settlers was about not only their material acquisitiveness, but also their ungraceful and greedy modes of conversation and unwillingness to listen wholeheartedly. Eduardo Galeano reports on a similar temperament of the Mayans who chose people who listened the best when it was time to elect a new leader. Benedictine monks, Taoists, and different Sufi orders all advised their followers to listen with your heart's ear. That recipe is meant to remind us that good listening is not an automatic affair and has a lot to do with your intention. Listening to respond swiftly and forcefully is based on different premises and holds different promises than listening with the goal of understanding. Presumably, listening with your heart's ear described the latter.

Listening has been called a gift and an act of love, and attention has been described as the purest form of generosity. Attention is indeed dear. Nobel Laureate Danield Kahneman has educated all of us on System 1 and System 2. To recap, System 1 is basically our autopilot mode. It allows us to run a very complicated machine optimally and without invoking energy-intensive System 2. System 2 kicks in when novel situations arise where the default mode proves insufficient. We know through other research that the model of our thinking as a computer sitting idly in a dark room called our brain, and kicking into action when receiving a new stimulus, is vastly inaccurate as well as outdated. Our mind works as an anticipation machine. We not only anticipate how every sentence would end, but also anticipate how every moment might evolve. It is much cheaper to maintain an anticipatory model, and adjust if and when proven wrong, than to treat every sentence and every moment as holding infinite possibilities. System 2 is in the business of making new predictions. We know that a chess player can spend as much as 6000 calories per day even when sitting down all day because each move by her opponent demands thorough attention. This is why such a thing as museum fatigue exists because, beyond walking through galleries, each exhibition

is new and demands full System 2 attention.

If attention and curiosity are expensive, indignation is cheap and provides relief. If you are morally repugnant, you are not worthy of my attention and my cognitive load is lighter. Our increasingly fast-paced world makes all kind of demands on our cognition. A century ago, Simone Weil had observed that attention is a rare but pure gift. Philosopher Simon Critchley narrates beautifully how pondering a single sentence for a long stretch of time was, for many centuries, a perfectly sensible way to pursue the truth. That path is now all but extinct. No one seems to be safe from the intrusions of attention engineers. There are reports that 2-year-olds are recorded with cameras by producers of lullabies, and new stimuli are added after every instance of their eyes momentarily leaving the screens. If anger disqualifies certain stimuli from costly processing and consideration, then it is a welcomed mode. It may also be that we do not feel we need each other very much. Any one of us is fairly disposable and replaceable, and we do have strong enough reasons to get along and go along. The field of legal anthropology has consistently shown the smaller pre-modern societies to be milder in their treatment of minor offences. The probable reason for this is the imperative to get along. What some call the digital disinhibition may have something to do with being released from this imperative. As a result, our indignation muscles are overgrown, while our appetite for curiosity atrophies. As we have too many transactions and not enough conversations, we also have too much indignation and not enough curiosity. Both imbalances are recipes for toxicity, and we should not accept them as inevitable. Quakers have a belief that an enemy is someone whose story you do not yet know. Not everyone has to be a Quaker, but we can ponder whether we have enough oases where we can taste being heeded and rekindle our appetite for curiosity. A follow-up question is whose responsibility it is to provide us these oases, if we are not to descend to feral hatred. There are many millions of people who want to sell us things, sign us up to their political agendas, and in general treat us as means and not as an end. Mark Freeman of the Global Initiative on Polarisation and IFIT reminds -and warns- us of the old dictum: “In order to organize, you must first polarize.” Moises Naim had identified a process where power has become “easier to gain, harder to use and easier to lose”; in a new book, the ever-perceptive Naim points to how power has reacted to this devaluation and found polarization as a highly potent tactic to recoup its losses. Naim’s polarization thrives on destroying the middle ground, and get everyone to choose side and as such close themselves to the other side. Others have categorized tactics such as “never allow the public to cool off; never admit a fault; never concede that there may be some good in your enemy; never leave room for alternative” as Hitler’s rule book.

What if the best among us were not angriest and the most indignant but those who found something valid on both sides of most arguments and somehow retained the curiosity to keep listening generously? We have to wonder who has taken on themselves to offer us a chance to listen and hear each other with all of our imperfections, contradictions, depth, as well as our superficialities. Is a world where we are only customers and partisans, and never peers and neighbours, viable or sustainable or simply worth preserving? Think about how many opportunities you have to improve your public speaking skills, or how to close a deal, or to come up with that killer presentation, and yet have you been offered any chance to assess or improve your listening skills? If we do not value listening well, can we ever disagree better? Research shows that people who feel heeded are more likely to listen more attentively. In other words, the current vicious cycles of not being heeded, turning to yelling to get the attention we feel we deserve, only to be out-yelled by the next person, can be replaced with the virtuous cycle of listening well leading to being heeded better. The question is whether any actor in the system cares enough about this sub-optimal status quo to offer people a break and a taste of generous listening. There is good evidence that people can recall with remarkable clarity the last time they were generously listened to. That means those offering the rest of us a pause and an experience of something different will be amply rewarded with acclaim and gratitude.

What Next?

If it is correct that we overlooked significant weakness, neglected vital tenets, and had crucial blind spots, what is there for us to do now above and beyond being aware of them?

The Dalai Lama is said to have noted that the planet does not need more "successful people," but it does desperately need more peacemakers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. Maria Popova describes an exceptional group of people as those "who alchemize suffering and rage into love, who compost disappointment into fertilizer for growth, who break down cynicism to its building blocks of helplessness and hubris, then metabolize the toxin out of the system we call society." I do not, yet, have a shorthand description for such people, but if a fraction of the previous sections is accurate, we need these exceptional people.

Yet as exceptional individuals, their catchment area is—and will stay—modest… very precious, but modest. There needs to be a systemic address for the need to cultivate the needed bonhomie, reverse the neglect of fraternity/camaraderie, give centripetal dynamics a chance to balance their centrifugal nemesis. I am partial towards local governments. In the period when Aristotle formulated his now-classic phrase anthropos zoon politikon (man is a political animal), Greek cities rarely had more than 50,000 inhabitants. Aristotle's

politics were more akin to what we refer to as civics today. Our local governments, once again, have to treat comanaging our commons as peers as a vital skill, a community muscle to be toned, and see supporting the exceptional individuals that Dalai Lama, Maria Popova, Krista Tippett and others have sketched poetically as a key task of theirs.

For centuries, European cities had citizens who quite capably co-managed their commons as peers. The very sites of where we distill, refine and reproduce our wherewithal for that comanagement are not secondary. Sometimes they are referred as mini publics or the third place: sites which are not our homes and work places, but sites where we meet our peers; sites of actual and possible fellowship. Tea houses, coffee houses, pubs (short for public house), parks…one scholar has discovered the mere act of sitting in front of your house at the end of the day and shoot the breeze with a few neighbours to be a very good indicator of whether that community will be able to act in unison when faced with aggressive gentrification. Another group of scholars have come together under the banner of the Front Porch Republic; their conviction is that human apprehension of the true, the good, and the beautiful is best realized within a dense web of meaningful family, neighbourhood, and community relationships. For them, front porches are the vital liminal and literal spaces where people come to know and live what they have in common, and as such are the opposite of patios at the back of the houses, which prioritize privacy and embody corrosive isolation.

Sociologists have long known about "collective effervescence" a feeling of self-transcendence that often arise at mass gatherings such as festivals, large public events, and collective rituals. Recent research re-confirms similar findings and underlines the long term pro-social effects of such gatherings. Are we confident that we have maximized the uses of such gatherings to balance the centrifugal trends of our age?

The School of Politics, with which I have been involved, started out as a venture to preach the virtues of liberal democracy, but evolved into a civic space where people from very diverse walks of life feel at home enough to listen to people whom they never thought they will meet in their lives. When asked several years after their time with the School to describe both what the School means for them and what their most important take a way was, our alumni most consistently and frequently pointed to an acquired taste for wholesome conversations. Much of what I have argued in terms of diagnosis and remedy is based on my experience at the European School of Politics. After ten years of the School, I am ready to posit that a good conversation is humanity's most consequential innovation. The fact that it is a capability available to all is nothing short of a miracle.

We are of course not the first to value conversations and propose it as means to address various challenges. We had already noted Erasmus as an early champion. David Bohm, an Einstein peer and heir, has chosen to advocate a particular type of dialogue after extensive inquiries into quantum physics and the nature of consciousness. Bohm, too, observes that to be is to be related. He maintains that there is a possibility of the transformation of individual and collective consciousness, and that possibility depends on dialogue. If we can really communicate, we can then have fellowship. For Bohm, this seminal communication is possible through creating an empty space without an agenda or program, suspending judgement, and through listening to all opinions. Michael Oakshot was another luminary deeply partial toward conversation, and described human beings as heirs "of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves. It is the ability to participate in this conversation, which distinguishes the human being from the animal".

My colleagues at the European School of Politics and I have looked at the recent experiences of other countries and what people with temperaments and methodologies similar to us do. We came across Monica Guzman and the Braver Angels in the United States who advocate for the merits of curiosity, and we recalled how Marcus Aurelius encouraged the virtues of owning the option not to have an opinion. We encountered David Brooks and his weavers who came in all shapes and forms, and are intent on following their work and learn from them. Similarly, we are grateful to the More In Common network and to various studies they have produced. A recent study by the US node of the More In Common network found some 70% of the Americans wanted to engage with people across various divides, and cited the absence of structured opportunities to do so and not unwillingness as the reason for not having done so to date. We are surprised and heartened that the manual by a modest youth group, Yes World, includes more wisdom and easily actionable recommendations regarding how to live well than the combined corpus of the McKinsey Global Institute. We were equally heartened to discover an august institution such as the RSA and its CEO, Andy Haldane, declare "Fostering greater connection between people needs to become the golden thread running through all public policy, and we will be working with our partners across government, business and civil society to grow this evidence base and put it to work in communities up and down the country."

These examples—and many more we must have overlooked but eager to discover—should also be sufficient to prove that we are not condemned to our current myopia. We can—and should aspire to—be better peers. We ought to and can de-pasteurize and reenchant

our language and imagination. Part of the myopia was caused by hubris and not taking the rest of the world seriously enough. Not because we live in a post-Western world but because we aspire to be worthy heirs to Goethe or to Henry David Thoreau or Bartolomé de Las Casa, our future scans and cosmos have to affirm the next E. Galeano, D. Tutu, and T. WeiMing.

Conversation may be the greatest of our inventions. Listening well is a capability accessible to all of us. Those who already have a taste for these things should pass on the word, or better: provide opportunities, no matter how modest, for the rest of us to experience these modes in person. They say the challenge with climate change is that while most of us think it is important, very few of us feel it is important. We should be grateful to Antonio Damasio and Lisa Feldman Barrett for educating us on how emotions are so fiercely central to our thinking and being. Fortunately, we have visceral ways of realizing and remembering what a good conversation, bonhomie, and camaraderie feel like. We are the problem, and also the remedy. Healing years of neglect will not and should not be quick, but as the proverb goes: The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now. The fact that we passed up on the best time is no reason to squander the second-best option.

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