

The United States Civic Wellness Movement:

An Observational Report

Overview

In the early 21st century in the United States of America, people from across the country built on the work of prior generations, giving rise to the United States Civic Wellness Movement. It is no exaggeration to say that this movement is part of a broader struggle between the forces of authoritarianism and those devoted to promoting self-governance rights through democratic systems.

The following account is not a traditional scholarly missive, but rather a snapshot of “history in the making.” It seeks to provide context and hope to those who may be despairing the dangers to individuals, families, and communities of our era’s brand of combative polarization, as seen on TV, in the halls of governance, and on social media. It strives to show where there is unity of mindset and effort, in contrast to toxic, divisive forces that do not serve the best interest of securing and promoting our republic’s constitutionally-based *domestic tranquility and general welfare* as blessings of liberty. The goal of this report (written out of a sense of duty to history) is to raise awareness and provide basic knowledge of the United States Civic Wellness Movement as a growing phenomenon at this stage in history. Within the context of a journey, the reader will learn about the movement’s key attributes and why this author argues that, as a phenomenon, it embodies and promotes the spirit of *Public Kinship** in our times.

“Time-Traveling Historian” Observes the Present

I am an ordinary American of no particular note, past or present. The great-granddaughter of an immigrant coal miner, granddaughter of working-class folk, and child

of public school teachers, I grew up in the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania in the 1970s-1980s. With degrees in education and history, I moved to the Upper Peninsula in the late 1990s to fulfill my calling to be a community college educator. In those years, I raised my daughter and built a career. I taught, advised, chaired and served on committees, and volunteered in my community. Though having produced [scholarly work](#) in my field, I mostly have focused on action or applied research as it relates to teaching and working with students. The focus of my innovating has been on crafting non-partisan, skills-oriented teaching methods focused on: critical thinking, historic empathy, bio-intuitive thinking, emotional intelligence, and other practical, job- ready skills that students need for success.

In the fall of 2019, though, I embarked on a deeper journey of service via a thought experiment. I decided to examine contemporary America with the mindset of a “time-traveling historian,” as if looking at the early 21st century one-hundred years from now to assess and summarize the landscape. Like most Americans, for decades I had been noticing the growing dysfunctionality and breakdown of our political culture and related systems. I wanted to observe, connect with, and document the actions of the people striving to clean up political toxicity and fix of our systems of self-governance. From both history and contemporary knowledge, I knew that people would be out there working. The task was to find them quickly and to assess their efforts with a broad and inclusive lens, with the aim of summarizing and communicating to the general public that this work exists and that, if individuals felt so led, they could participate, too.

Though there is more to the story than what I am about to tell, most of what motivated me into action was a vision of the future. Specifically, I was concerned about the historical narrative our era was leaving to generations yet born. As the events of the last decade or so

unfolded, a deep sadness overtook my heart as a citizen and educator, and my recently-diagnosed neurodivergent, imaginative brain sprang into action! I decided to deepen my ownership of the idea that – like all humans – I am a history maker. As a United States citizen with natural liberties, I can claim this self-agency. I also have the inherited right and duty to exercise my power of independent thought and action to help advance civic well-being in our times. Over time, my particular role evolved into spreading hope for a more compassionate country by connecting the public to the work of individuals and groups in the civic wellness movement, especially intergenerationally.

Efforts continued into late 2019, when a small group of scholars/concerned citizens and I formed a minor, non-partisan, all volunteer organization *Compassionate America (CA)*, which still serves as an amplifier and message of hope to our fellow Americans via our website and Twitter feed. Anchored in compassion philosophy, our *Declaration of Mission* acted as a siren's call to all who wanted to shift toward a more positive mindset and way of being in civic society. It was an outreach of "If you don't like our country's current political tone and behaviors, you are not alone, and we can do something about it!" *Compassionate America* became an amplification and connector organization for all who crave a different, more respectful way of "doing" politics and culture than what has been served to us in increasingly large portions over the past 30 years by the political-media complex. Through my outreach role, I spent several years and countless hours conducting what I call "real-time history" research by using Twitter as a key primary-source document, conversing with individuals and representatives of the organizations encountered, and reading a sampling of related data and scholarship.

Quickly, I found the people “minding the shop” of our democratic republic. Some have been leading the charge for decades; others are relative newcomers, like us. All are impassioned and devoted to creating a more perfect and peaceful union. Though demographically diverse actors, most tend to lean centrist-to-liberal. However, many conservative voices are present, particularly in key leadership roles, such as Pearce Godwin of the *Listen First Project* and Bill Shireman of *In this Together*. Regardless of party or ideology, all want to generate a different, healthier narrative for America in the early 21st century. In my observations and conversations, I asked questions like:

- What common-good innovation is happening?
- Who is working to reduce toxicity in our political culture?
- How is this work being done?
- Who emphasizes independent thought and reducing blind, partisan/ideological tribalism so as to forge solutions for a more perfect union?
- How effective and far-reaching is this work?

I met many individuals and groups who have stepped up to make and be the change(s) most Americans have wanted for decades.

Personally, these connections launched my work into new spheres of collaboration and empowered me to employ my creative, analytical, and empathic neurodivergent-skills in new settings. I was/am an observer, a servant, and simply one of many. As the months went on, it became increasingly evident that future history students would need to know about, learn from as role-models, and ideally find inspiration in the vast field of Americans endeavoring to improve our republic’s health and functional wellbeing in these times.

The U.S. Civic Wellness Movement as Public Kinship

Important in my journey have been certain mentors and colleagues who have devoted their lives to problem-solving for a greater civic good in the spirit of what Dr. Bobby Austin, of *Neighborhood Associates* (NAC) and the *Public Kinship Institute* (PKI), identifies as [*Public Kinship](#). In 2020, I was introduced to Dr. Austin and his colleague Dr. Alex Bain by mathematician and reform-field visionary/connector, Mr. Norlyn Dimmit of *Compassionate Citizens Foundation*. The folks at NAC/PKI embraced and accepted me (and my quirky brain) like no group of intellectuals had before. We worked together on a grant proposal, forged connections with other organizations, and touched the lives of young people via intergenerational dialogues.

From connections like these, further invention, collaboration, and service unfolded, as I got to know more of the people/organizations acting on our inherited responsibility to caretake our civic and political culture. They are serious-minded in their work, and they also are the hope-makers of our age. To my analysis, the nature and components of the United States Civic Wellness Movement highlights an organic rise in American society of the spirit of Dr. Austin's public kinship, which he breaks down ontologically as:

1. ***Environmental Scan and Self-Leadership***: (a) inventory of the environment in which you live; (b) an inward journey into Self;
2. ***Suspension of Judgment but not of Common Sense***: relinquishing previous prejudices but maintaining sound-learned ideals;
3. ***Ethical Leadership in the development of the Moral Mind***: creating a vocabulary that supports the development of moral actors in communities;
4. ***Taking a Stand***: purposeful moral action as a committed individual;
5. ***Participating***: acting in good faith for the common good;

6. **Connecting:** *being present and active as an individual;*
7. **Public Kinship:** *what I do to build shared experiences with others.*
8. **Assuming a Common Culture:** *The elements of shared learning, social development, spirituality-building and artistic creation which over time shape the individuals we are.*

(Source: [Neighborhood Associates. Ontology for Public Kinship as a Leadership Platform](#))

At the end of this report, I suggest how the United States Civic Wellness Movement reflects these eight characteristics in ways that both offer hope and serve as a call-to-action in our times.

Components of a Movement

To my observations, the United States Civic Wellness Movement is comprised of six, oft-intertwined **components**, characterized by a growing and seemingly innumerable list of organizations, which are pro-democratic republic and pro-problem solving in their missions.

The six components are:

- **Civics Education**
- **Listening-Dialogue Across Difference**
- **Self-Governance Reform**
- **Justice & Community Work**
- **Amplification & Connection**
- **Data, Tech, & News**

Before, I address each, let us consider a general sampler of organizations in the United States Civic Wellness Movement that are shouldering real change of, by, and for the people in the early 21st century. The fact that the following chart cannot contain the full accompaniment of

organizations – *all of which deserve full credit and recognition* – is regretful. Thus, I refer all to [Citizen Connect](#) to see the scale and scope of the movement.

United States Civic Wellness Movement: Components and Organization Sampler

(A sampler appears on the next page).

Civics Information & Education:	Listening-Dialogue Across Difference:	Justice & Community Work:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic Spirit • Civic Health Project • Civic Genius • Citizen University • iCivics • Generation Citizen • Local Civics • Web Civics • Civics Unplugged • Civics Today • Made By Us • Center for Civics Education • National Civic League • Civic Education Project • American Civics League 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen First Project • National Day of Dialogue • Waging Dialogue • Braver Angels • Livingroom Conversations • Beyond Your Bubble • Common Ground • In This Together • Depolarize USA • Kitchen Table Democracy • Civil Dialogues • Unify America • FeelReal • Facing Project • Bridge Alliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil Liberties Groups • Civil Rights Groups • Environmental Groups • Asset Based Community Development • Non-violence Advocacy • Pluralistic Awareness <p style="margin-left: 20px; color: blue;">Such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charter for Compassion • Neighborhood Associates, • Center for Constitutional Rights • Advancement Project • Equal Justice Initiative • Color of Change

Self-Governance Reform:	Amplification & Connection:	Data-Tech and News:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open Primaries • Election Reformers Network • Fair Vote • Fair Fight • Rank Choice Voting • Star Voting • Voting Rights • Braver Politics • FixUS • RepresentUs • Vote Nevada 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compassionate Citizens Foundation • Compassionate Illinois • Citizen Connect • Big Tent Nation • Unite America • Listen First Coalition • HeartMath Institute • Various podcasts, YouTube channels, webinars, and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agents of Influence • Civii • Civil Talk • The Fulcrum • Citizen Data • More in Common • All Sides • Left-Right News • Daily Halloha • ClearGov • Nextdoor • AI Decodes the System

Self-Governance Reform:	Amplification & Connection:	Data-Tech and News:
	documentaries, e.g. <i>The Reunited States</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civinomics

Attributes of the Six Components

To my observations, each of the Civic Wellness Movement’s components can be explained as follows.

1. Civics Education:

The organizations in this area are performing one of the most critical roles in our republic: educating the next generation about civics and the responsibilities of citizenship. As I know them, they are steadfast and meticulous in their efforts to remain non-partisan and to help Americans understand and value their rights and duties in a republic such as ours. *Go to them when you want to educate and empower yourself and the next generation with the civic knowledge necessary to sustain and participate effectively in our self-governance over time.*

2. Listening-Dialogue-Bridging:

The folks in this area are of the most compassionate people I have ever met. They are driven and have braved themselves toward the task of actually meaning it when they say “Let’s talk about the hard stuff, but can we please be respectful and considerate as we do?” As they will tell you, you do not just start with dialogue; you begin with learning and practicing listening skills, first.

Go to them when you want to connect with the folks who are maintaining the freedom-of-thought and personal expression side of living in a republic and to

understand why listening glues a people together as humans from the heart, not just the mind.

3. Self-Governance Reform:

This is the front-line work tied to reforming our self-governing systems. These souls deserve our admiration because they are fearlessly entering the political arena, which as we all know is a personal risk that exposes one to some of the nastiest of human behaviors.

Go to these individuals and organizations to duke it out with “the forces that be” to bring: innovation through a market-place of ideas, meaningful systems reform, problem-solving, and greater competition to our country’s political landscape.

4. Justice and Community Work:

This area of the field deals with neighbor-to-neighbor interactions and how we as human beings fundamentally view and treat each other. I do not spend as much observational time with these folks, but their work is critically important to the populace’s literal health and well-being.

Go to them if you want to support opening up the hearts and minds of more Americans to our common humanity.

5. Amplification:

These folks function as the town criers or cheerleaders of the movement. They promote the work done in the other categories. They are keenly interested in the success of the Civic Wellness Movement as an important chapter in United States history -- one they hope will sustain the republic and inspire generations to come. They also seek to role-model the mindsets and rhetorical approaches that individuals can

embrace to further heal our contemporary “civic-unwellness.”

Go to them if you want to help share about the movement as a message of hope in our times by getting the word out far and wide, starting with your family, friends, and neighbors.

6. Data-Tech and News:

There are two facets to this category – in no order. First, there are the individuals who use data analysis and “techy” things to understand the state of the Union and make civics work, functionally and healthfully. Second, there are the “read all about it,” people, who are forging new ways for Americans to get fair, balanced, and diverse news and perspectives.

Go to them if you like the numbers, charts, graphs, etcetera that allow us to navigate the complex information landscape of our times. You also can go to them to find the tech-tools for community building around the work of the movement. Please note that most of the movement’s for-profits fall into this category.

The Civic Wellness Movement as a Rise of National Public Kinship

As mentioned earlier, it is this time-space sojourner’s assessment that the early 21st century’s United States Civic Wellness Movement has taken its place in the annals of history as public kinship in action. Thus, let’s return to Dr. Austin’s *Ontology of Public Kinship*. To my eyes, the work of the movement, as a whole, reflects its eight aspects. To illustrate my thinking in a condensed form, I will combine the categories into four larger questions and explain from there.

Question 1: Have the people of this movement engaged in understanding the environments in which they live and taken an inward journey to self?

In order to step out into this work, one must engage in an inward journey from start to finish – I will even argue that it is an inescapable truth - a path that must be taken. Perhaps I am projecting from my own journey into the movement, but I have spoken with many others, heard their personal stories, and listened to why they have entered the fray. They ask themselves questions tied to their: skills, values, morality, personalities, lifestyles, hopes, dreams, loves, and ways of being. They question how much or how little they should do, given that they must – like all humans - balance their work and personal lives with the demands of entering the field. Of course, this inward journey includes looking outward as an individual to assess what is going on around them and understand it as much as possible before taking action – but also among them are people – like me – who say, “first you jump, then get wings.” (Simple Minds, 2022)

Question 2: In order to suspend prejudiced judgment, but not common sense, do they maintain sound-learned ideals and seek to ethically develop a vocabulary that those of moral mind and action may use in communities?

As I have watched the organizations in the field work, particularly those in the listening-dialogue, civics, and amplification categories, I see this as an intrinsic value that the organizations strive to role-model, at large. In their professionalism, they lean on ideals that are rooted in basic common sense with an aim to forge related, practical solutions. Though I cannot attest to all of the organizations and individuals involved, collectively they hold a growth mindset as they evolve a rhetorical style reflective of a moral mind. It is one anchored in wording that reflects common-good thinking like:

well-being, healing, accountability, responsibility, overcoming toxicity, peace, unity, social cohesion, common ground, and more.

Question 3: In taking a stand are they committed to being present and acting in good faith for the common good as they actively build shared experiences with others in Public Kinship?

If I could describe in one word the level of commitment that the folks in the United States Civics Wellness Movement have toward their cause, it would be “indomitable.” To watch these people work is an honor, privilege, and joy. They come together on projects, share ideas, and celebrate successes, collectively and individually. These people are our era’s civic thought leaders, blessings of liberty keepers, and domestic-tranquility-general-welfare DIY-ers! Due to the overload that public spaces, technologies, and socializing can generate in my neurodivergent mind-body system, I have been shy to highly civically engage. For folks of similar nature, I can testify to their warm ways of welcoming newcomers and those who think about and interface with the world differently.

Question 4: Are they advancing elements of: shared learning, social development, spirituality-building, and artistic creation, which over time shape the individuals we are in common culture?

Though I cannot attest to the component of “spirituality-building” from my observations, otherwise, the answer is a firm “yes.” It is exactly what they do. The organizations in the field, albeit somewhat in competition with each other,

e.g. for grant funding, also share: resources, scholarship, data, visionary ideas, creative resources, and positive mindsets that impact not only the communities they serve but also their volunteers, membership, and staff. The phrase “sharing is caring,” is more than a platitude to many in the movement; they legitimately believe that collectively Americans have the power to identify and heal a better functioning common culture for our republic as everyone travels deeper into the 21st century.

Conclusion

Though a very locally-focused person who tended mostly to family and career, in 2019, with our country’s toxic negativity affecting the well-being of my: family members, students, campus, and community, I launched into a non-traditional journey that followed the direction of my heart and mind. I began studying and serving what I identify as the *United States Civic Wellness Movement*. The movement works for the greater civic good in numerous ways, as identified by the categories mentioned earlier. Fundamentally, it was built on the shoulders of 20th century reforms and philosophies in areas like: civics education, justice, pluralism, civil rights, community service, and systems reform. The individuals in this movement are tackling the mess of: fear, frustration, ignorance, and worry that has wrought a toxicity so dangerous that it may threaten the survival of the American experiment in democracy if not course-corrected.

This movement has brought unheard voices out of their shells and into civic service out of a sense of duty to country and humanity. I have been blessed to be an eye-witness to and minor participant in this history. I hope this humble report highlights to those of the present (and future) that indeed there is reason to hope for a more compassionate America! The Civic

Wellness Movement is growing, seemingly by the day –not just organizationally but as a *new energy for change* within the populace. It is touching more people by the year; and, to my thinking, evidences that the spirit of Public Kinship organically lives in the hearts and minds of many Americans, today. The scope of what will be birthed from it, remains to be seen, but make no mistake: the history we are leaving future generations is most certainly ours to write!

Our generation has inherited a distinct calling or choice to make within our social compact. We must either stand for a peaceful, well-functioning republic by joining with others in support of the United States Civic Wellness Movement **or** stay stuck in the “same-ole-same-ole” tribalism, toxic politics, and culture wars that have plagued our country and self-governing systems for decades and increasingly have endangered our physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

Albeit this may sound idealist or akin to dreaming, the reality of the data shows - as John Lennon sings: “I’m not the only one” with this vision and hope for our future. In your state, town, and neighborhood, more people than you realize are working for our constitutionally-anchored domestic tranquility and general welfare. Will you join them?

Respectfully submitted,

June Klees, PhD

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