

Time for a New Generation of Leaders to Carry the Torch

The closing verse of *In Flanders Fields* begins with a lyrical invocation: "Take up our quarrel with the foe: To you from failing hands we throw the torch; be yours to hold it high". While John McCrae, the Canadian physician who penned those great words, was concerned with the plight of young men and women who gave their lives for their country, his call should also remind us to honour those who came before in all aspects of human endeavour, and to carry the metaphorical torch on the next stage of its journey. I've thought of this a good deal recently as three of North America's leading public intellectuals have passed from the stage. Within a span of less than 3 weeks last month, **William Sloane Coffin**, **Jane Jacobs**, and **John Kenneth Galbraith** died. And with their passing the world lost an irretrievable part of its intellectual legacy. It now falls to a younger generation to step up and lead our society. I wonder if we are up to it?

The Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr. was a liberal Christian clergyman, but he was much more than that. A ridiculously talented man, Coffin was a superb athlete, an accomplished pianist, a CIA agent, and later, the chaplain of Yale University and a leader in the civil-rights and peace movements of the 1960s and 1970s. He opposed United States military intervention from Vietnam to Iraq and wasn't afraid to use his pulpit as a platform for like-minded crusaders, notably Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. An inspiring speaker, Coffin has been a source of encouragement to me with his reminder that:

We don't have to be "successful", only valuable. We don't have to make money, only a difference, and particularly in the lives society counts least and puts last.

Jacobs is justly famous for *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, a book that turned urban planning on its head, but I believe *The Economy of Cities* will continue to grow in stature and may ultimately stand as her most lasting contribution to the intellectual firmament. Here, Jacobs identified the creative milieu of a diverse city as an essential prerequisite for economic growth. This particular work influenced, among others, Nobel Laureate Robert Lucas at the University of Chicago. John Barber, writing in *The Globe and Mail*, aptly described the scope of Jacobs' influence:

When she wasn't destroying the academy of urban planning in a stunning display of the power of ideas, or rewriting world history and macroeconomic theory to reveal the seminal role of cities, she was teaching us how to live in them.

Galbraith became famous in 1958 with the publication of *The Affluent Society*, in which he argued that industrial production was being devoted to satisfying trivial consumer needs, in part to maintain employment, and that the United States should shift resources to improve schools, infrastructure, recreational resources, and social services, providing a better quality of life instead of an ever greater quantity of consumer goods. His critique influenced efforts during the 1960s to improve the quality of public institutions and facilities, and is an often overlooked contribution to the modern environmental movement.

Collectively, Coffin, Jacobs and Galbraith had the capacity to, as John Ralston Saul would have it, find out what's truly going on in society and talk

about it. I would add that they did so with rare panache. And now they are gone. How to fill the void?

Today we bow before the twin altars of abstraction and specialization. And to be sure there are benefits to society of specialist knowledge, but it seems to me that the enduring legacy, and lesson, of Coffin, Jacobs and Galbraith is to keep our perspectives firmly rooted in the reality of how things actually work, and to not lose sight of the public good. Let's not assume anything; instead, let's pay attention to the simple things that often aren't so simple at all. The messy vitality of neighborhood streets that don't all look the same; real-life experiences that trump abstract economic theory, particularly the idea of consumer sovereignty in an age of omnipresent advertising; the virtue of keeping the future open and flexible. Put another way, let's loosen our grip on theory and science just a little and seek a visceral connection with the world, and with the communities of which we are a part.

Finally, and most importantly, let's follow the example of **Patagonia** founder, Yvon Chouinard, a worthy heir to Coffin *et al*, who once observed that "evil doesn't always have to be an overt act, it can be merely the absence of good". He added that if you have the opportunity and the ability to do good and you choose to do nothing, you are complicit in the creation or perpetuation of evil. I couldn't agree more. We fill the void created by the passing of our elders by absorbing their lessons and example, and giving them new life through our voices and our example. Onward.

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