

**Civil Society:
The Underpinnings of American Democracy**

Brian O'Connell
(Tufts University, 1999)

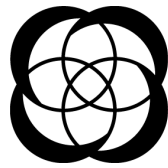
Brian O'Connell was the Founding President of Independent Sector, an organization that he helped to create with John W. Gardner in the 1980s to help nonprofit organizations. This gem of a book should become an essential part of the core readings for the proposed John W. Gardner Academy for Regional Stewardship along with *On Leadership* by Gardner, *the Magic of Dialogue* by Daniel Yankelovich and the Federalist Papers as the foundation for creating the new regionalist papers.

This book begins with a foreword by John Gardner that sets the stage “the American Experiment is still in the laboratory. And there could be no nobler task for our generation than to move that great effort forward”. Gardner goes on to say “there are extraordinary things happening at the grassroots today—in city after city across this nation—so extraordinary that I truly believe we are beginning to write a whole new chapter in the tumultuous American story. “

John's friend, Brian O'Connell, wrote this book to respond to the growing interest in civil society. He says “the book reflects my belief that civil society is essential for American democracy but so little is understood.” He sees civil society as the essential buffer— independent and participatory—between business and government. He explores the origins of our extraordinary civil society from the founding of the republic through the observations of Tocqueville on the role of associations in America to our current times. His basic message is that effective citizenship is essential for effective government.

To O'Connell, like Gardner, citizenship and participation in civil society involved both rights and responsibilities. As Gardner said: “Freedom and responsibility, liberty and duty, that's the deal.” O'Connell has the following suggestions for strengthening civil society:

- Bring into every level of formal education a preparation for citizenship and understanding of the essential role of civil society in preserving and strengthening American democracy
- Accept civil literacy as a national priority for all Americans, including the understanding of the direct relationship between effective societies and the degree to which citizens can be and are active in influencing it



- Understand better what it takes to pass to future generations the practice of responsible citizenship and develop every means to ensure that we succeed in passing along roles and responsibilities
- Expand and publicize research about what civil society is and its relationship to the protection and strengthening of democracy
- Build on the sovereign role of citizens as the cornerstone of democracy
- Take fullest advantage of the new emphasis on community capacity building and community problem solving and apply what we already know about developing healthy neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan regions
- Establish regular evaluations of the state of our democracy with careful attention to civil society
- Develop a large and sustained effort to promote civility as the most elemental expectation of American citizenship.

Wise words from a wise man.