

2023-2024 Touchstones Annual Theme: Reimagining the Common Good

The “letter” of the common good includes fundamental rights and freedoms; cultural institutions; highways, streets, and sidewalks; a transportation system; fire, police, and public safety; sanitation; a judicial system; an electoral system; national defense; public education; a safe and ample food supply; clean water and air; parks; and natural resources. These are some of the nuts and bolts of civic/civil society and a robust and effective democracy.

But there is also the “spirit” of the common good, which presupposes every person’s inherent worth and dignity and seeks justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Most social problems are tied to how well or poorly the elements supporting the common good work. And those elements go far beyond government to include non-profits, businesses, labor unions, social justice organizations, community groups, neighbors, and more. Some people benefit far more from the common good than others, as homelessness, poverty, racism, gun violence, and more attest.

Reimagining the common good requires looking at society and ourselves because the common good is always in competition with individual needs and interests. Building support for the common good in a “me” culture is challenging. It requires a balancing act between what we hold and value in common, and the forces of need and greed.

In this overall consideration of the common good, we must also attend to the commons, which is defined as “the cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society, including natural materials such as air, water, and a habitable Earth.” Said differently, our embrace of the common good must expand to include the planet Earth.

Why does this annual theme matter? Lisa Sharon Harper presents a poignant articulation of why the common good is so important. She writes, “In light of death, [and] life ...the common good can feel lofty, insignificant, extra-curricular, or like the self-indulgent rhetoric of the political class. ...As I held my newborn niece, Dove, it hit me: ...I was seeing the common good ...as a laundry list of political issues we should care about.... But the common good is not only about politics. The common good is about life and how we live it. It is ultimately about how we are all connected. It is about how our love or lack of love affects our families, our neighbors, our communities, our cities, our nation, and our world. ...The common good is about personal brokenness ...reconciliation. ...truth telling. ...The common good is about generosity and humility and ultimately it is about love. Are we cultivating generosity? Are we cultivating humility? Are we cultivating the kind of love ... that flowed from the good Samaritan? ...As much as I love my niece, I love the *quartet of the vulnerable*, as Nicholas Wolterstorff calls them: the orphan, the widow, the immigrant, and the poor through my public voice, my taxes, and my vote. In a democracy, we are all profoundly connected.”

As described below, the exploration of each monthly theme proceeds on two levels: the essence and importance of the theme and its connection to informing, reimagining, supporting, and advancing the common good.

Month	Theme	Brief Description
September	Beauty	Beauty is an intrinsic good that enhances our well-being. It is a relationship between our senses and reality that soothes, elevates, and charms. Our enculturation, however, can restrict our ability to see beauty in other cultures and expressions. Albert Camus valued beauty, but he was also aware of those who were humiliated by society. By choosing, as he said, to be faithful to both, he advocated justice and beauty as elements of the common good.
October	Hospitality	Hospitality emerged as an ancient obligation grounded in reciprocity. It is an act of love that cannot exist in hate’s shadow. Hospitality’s ability to overcome barriers by welcoming the stranger elicits a willingness to support the common good.
November	Faith	Wilfred Cantwell Smith asserted that faith is an orientation to the self, neighbor, and the universe, a quality of human living. Belief is content; faith is a process that influences how we live and make life with meaning possible. Support for and cultivation of the common good is an exercise in faith that goodwill can be a bridge that reaches across much that divides us.
December	Hope	Despite adversity, hope is a life orientation that believes we can prevail. Hope is a shapeshifter that adapts in the face of reality to “encourage” us, which means “to put heart into” us. The common good hangs in the balance in the struggle between hope and fear. Hope undergirds what William James called a “civic temper,” which helps us transcend the drive for individual survival to focus on the common good and create a meaningful existence.

January	Justice	<p>We view justice as a trinity that includes equity and compassion. Our task is to work with others “to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice.” It is a neverending struggle against the forces of injustice.</p> <p>Justice must operate far beyond the judicial system if the common good is to be enhanced. Social justice, economic justice, climate justice, and more must balance the needs of the many against the benefit of the powerful few.</p>
February	Love	<p>If we are fortunate, we are held in love from birth, and if we are wise, we do not keep love but give it away like Malvina Reynolds’ magic penny.</p> <p>Love is a foundation of the common good. The parable of the Good Samaritan emphasizes the necessity of loving your neighbor as yourself. The Golden Rule’s reciprocity can unleash the power of love for the common good.</p>
March	Humility	<p>Humility, one of seven medieval virtues, has fallen in stature; now considered a weakness rather than a strength. Yet such a view gets humility entirely wrong. As A. R. Bernard wrote, “Humility is not weakness, but strength under control.” To cultivate humility is to be an architect of compassion. True humility is spiritual maturity</p> <p>We should not assume we know what constitutes the common good from a position of privilege and power. Humility encourages us to dialogue with those receiving less good to pursue a holistic view of the “common” good.</p>
April	Transformation	<p>Most change in our life is minor or first-order change, a logical extension between past and current behavior. However, second-order change is radically different. It involves a new way of seeing and being. It is called transformation, a profound, qualitative, irreversible change in who you are and what you do.</p> <p>Lynn Ashbeck asks, “How do we get from transactions to transformation? From authority to power? From self-interest to the common good? And how is it that ...we often seem to mistake one for the other?” Incremental change of the common good is a pacifier if transformation is what is needed.</p>
May	Beloved Community	<p>Beloved Community is not the hierarchical, colonial, Puritan <i>City upon the Hill</i>. Instead, Beloved Community, as Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned it, is built on reconciliation, redemption, and love. It is a transforming circle cast wide.</p> <p>As Carrie Cheathan writes, “Beloved Community is a calling that leads to action for the common good. Among other things, building Beloved Community is an antidote to the toxicity of politics and culture....”</p>
June	The 8 th Principle	<p>The 8th principle envisions a diverse, multicultural Beloved Community that accountably dismantles racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.</p> <p>The 8th principle embodies King’s dream with an explicit call to action rather than an implicit one. Its focus on racism and other oppressions should help us overcome narrow concepts of the common good.</p>
July	Unity/Diversity	<p>The notion of unity in diversity in our congregations has been a goal theologically, sociologically, racially, economically, and more. Though glimpsed in moments but never fully embodied, the pursuit should continue.</p> <p>The ideal of the common good acknowledges diversity even if we remain needlessly divided. Perhaps we need more imagination, a pursuit of an uncommon good to unite us across all divides.</p>
August	Wisdom	<p>Unitarian Universalism is a wisdom tradition that supports our pursuit of wisdom. Wisdom is less about accumulation and more about how the quest changes us.</p> <p>Wisdom helps us imagine common and uncommon goods and then encourages us to bring them to life.</p>

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which according to one source is “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”

More completely, the Common Good:

Presupposes respect for all persons

Assumes that public authority will support and respect the inalienable rights of all people.

Encourages the exercise of our natural freedoms

Calls forth actions on the part of individuals that contribute to the well-being and proper moral framework of society.

The Catechism also underscores that, regarding government, It is the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens, and intermediate bodies.

A few of the things making up the common good in a modern democracy might include basic rights and freedoms, cultural institutions, police and public safety, a judicial system, , public education, clean air and water, safe and ample food supply, and national defense.

Reimagining the common good requires that we look critically at society and at ourselves. Unfortunately, concern for the common good does not seem to be a priority. Many philosophers, John Locke and John Rawls included, have determined that democracy will fail if citizens place personal gain over the common good. The challenge of good government is to fairly balance the two by ensuring the well-being of all citizens rather than favoring special interests. The challenge of responsible citizenship and the common good

Examples of elements making up the common good include basic rights and freedoms, police and fire departments, national defense, courts of law, highways, public schools, safe food and water, and natural resources.

The commons is the cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society, including natural materials such as air, water, and a habitable Earth.

most social problems are in some way tied to how well or poorly these systems and facilities are working.

Homelessness, poverty, racism, domestic violence,

Philosophers such as John Locke, David Hume, Niccolo Machiavelli, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Rawls, have stated that democracy will fail if citizens become more concerned with personal benefits than the common

good. They agree that the purpose of government is to ensure the well-being of all citizens and that no government should serve only special interests, such as the interests of the wealthy and powerful.