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An American Rite of Passage

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Democracy is a delicate proposition. While it's a system of government, it is, as one of democracy's great patrons once intoned, "Of the people, by the people, and for the people." Those words need to mean something to each one of us. If they don't, if we're not engaged, then it's just a system. We the people give the system life.

Perhaps, you think that's merely the romantic language of democracy. You'd be right, of course. The grammar of the common good has been lost in so many partisan dialects. The diversity of voices, the rhythm that drives the democratic conversation, is blatantly out of synch.

But hold that thought. Hold it because democracy is essentially romantic. It speaks to the romance of our own lives, to the virtues and values that each one of us longs for. We do give the system life because it's in our nature to bring forth something like democracy.

There are two dreams of America, wrote the philosopher Jacob Needleman. In the authentic dream, notions of truth, freedom and independence are no mere language constructs that set us apart or above other people and nations. Quite the contrary, they are universals, lodged in the consciousness - in the heart - of every citizen of the planet. Imagine the conversations of those people we call the "Framers," what they felt, what they envisioned. The magnificent aspiration of America -- the real dream -- was to craft a social order from these values. Beneath the social order, though, it was also personal: "To shelter and guard the rights of all men and women to seek the conditions and the companions," as Needleman put it, to know what those lofty words meant deep in their own lives.

There is another notion, another word that is essential to the conversation about America. The word is service, and it too has been institutionalized, primarily around the military. But it also has roots in our need to express our connection to each other, to bind the social order.

The Franklin Project is about those "conditions and companions," and the chance to make a difference. It proposes a voluntary civilian service counterpart to military service in the United States, with the aim to dramatically expand opportunities for Americans to contribute their strengths in addressing the nation's most pressing challenges -- challenges in education, energy, health, economic opportunity and more.

General Stanley McChrystal introduced the civilian service corps at the Aspen Ideas Festival last year to overwhelming response. In his recent Wall Street Journal op-ed, he noted that our understanding of service had become far too narrow. As the General put it, "You don't need to hear the hiss of bullets to develop a deeper claim to the nation." For those who doubt, he pointed them to the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, the plains of Oklahoma and the struggling classrooms of our inner cities.

There's plenty of work to do and plenty of Americans ready to do it. In 2011, there were nearly 600,000 applications to AmeriCorps -- a program with only 80,000 positions, only half of which are full time. The Peace Corps received 150,000 requests for applications but has funding for only 4,000 new positions each year.

The Franklin Project makes the case to engage one million people in a one year commitment to voluntary national service. It proposes the bold action of replacing Selective Service with a National Service System, presenting every 18-year-old with a menu of voluntary options, including the military, for service through a new online portal.

Miami Dade College and many other higher education institutions across the nation place great emphasis on Service Learning. Our students, across the entire curriculum, branch out to address a full range of community needs, then bringing their experiences back to the classroom. They prepare tax returns and deliver health screenings for low-income residents; clean parks and riverways; teach reading in our schools and much more. With their faculty mentors, they embrace civic engagement as an essential learning outcome of a college education. Our colleges and universities can serve as core catalysts for the Franklin Project, because this is a culture that can and will take root across our entire country.

The Franklin Project will offer Americans from every corner of this country the promise of a renewed rite of passage. It has drawn support from the leaders of every sector of American society, but it will find its true success in the grassroots of our lives, in the experiences that remain the foundation of the real American Dream.

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