



Civic Complicity

A couple weeks ago, I had this amazing opportunity to present to the entire staff and board of the Weingart Foundation, one of the most important philanthropic organizations in the SoCal region. I was there to help my friend Miguel, Weingart's CEO and my unofficial mentor in civic activism, and my role was to challenge the group to think differently about how to help with two massive issues: affordable housing and homelessness. No easy task, of course, but I think it went pretty well.

Anyway, I got there early, as I usually do, and walked in at the end of the morning session. They were going through the history of the foundation, basically asking the question: how did Ben Weingart, the foundation's generous benefactor, make all this money in the first place? They went so far as to bring on a historian to really examine the history. What they discovered was really interesting. For some reason, I got the feeling that like many left-leaning individuals they sort of assumed and expected that there just had to be something not quite right about Weingart's conduct. He was one of those "evil" developers after all. But, interestingly, their historian didn't uncover any smoking guns! It turns out Weingart was a pretty good guy. To the extent he made moral mistakes in amassing his fortune, they were mistakes of complicity. While Weingart was a guy who played by the rules, not all the rules were fair or right. So, yes, he did profit from things like housing developments with racial covenants and substandard low income rental housing but he wasn't overtly guilty of anything egregious.

My friend Miguel, who is a master at gleaning the important points from very complex situations, challenged his team and board in a really provocative way:

"Let's ask ourselves a tough question: What are we complicit in ourselves?"

This is such a great question because it's one we never really ask. Not only is it clearly the salient takeaway from the Ben Weingart story but also it's exactly the kind of thing a big non-profit foundation should be thinking about. Historical introspection is hard to begin with and in that kind of environment, where everyone is basically nobly focused on doing good for society, it's difficult to even acknowledge the possibility that you might be complicit in something that's wrong or bad or immoral.

After the meeting, the question stayed with me. While some obvious answers came to mind—like our collective complicity in the degradation of the environment and the mistreatment of animals—I felt like there was more to it than that. I wasn't quite satisfied with the direction of my thinking. Then something crazy happened.

As I was walking home from the gym on a Saturday morning, feeling pretty exhausted of course and rushing because I had to get the boys off to gymnastics and baseball, I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. A fight! And it wasn't

just some ordinary fist fight. One obviously homeless guy was chasing another with a big yellow stick. In the moment, I couldn't tell if it was wood or plastic but as I heard it smack against the one guy's back, I knew instantly that, whatever it was, it hurt! The scuffle spilled into the parking lot of what used to be my family's favorite local restaurant (now closed and vacant like so many places around town). As the attacker rushed forward with clearly menacing intent, the other guy tripped and fell onto the ground. Immediately, the attacker started raining down blows on this guy with the stick.

I don't know what made me do it, but without really thinking, I stopped and just yelled "Hey guys...Cut it out!" I turned to the pursuer and said "Back away. Right now." My wife will laugh at this because she thinks I'm too nice (i.e., soft) but I think I even threw in a "Please" at the end. And for a moment, time slowed down to a crawl. I thought to myself "Ok, now what? What if he keeps attacking? What if he turns his attention toward me?" Of course, I didn't have a good plan.

I must've used my angry, imperative Dad voice—something rather foreign to me by the way—because to my surprise and relief he actually stopped hitting the guy and in the pause created by my intervention the two separated. Just then, my friend Greg from the gym, who had seen the situation developing, ran up to my side and I felt this wave of relief. The two fighters were still clearly very agitated and were yelling back and forth but they were at least moving away from each other instead of towards. Thank God!

I tried to call 911 but the operator was unhelpful to say the least.

"Is that a West Hollywood address? Because if it is you need to call the Sheriff's office."

"Mam, there's a man with a stick beating on another person 10 feet away from me."

"But are you in West Hollywood?"

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I rushed to get off the phone so I could just leave the area and get on with my day.

Later that morning, as I was watching the kids at gymnastics, I couldn't help but notice the stark contrast between the innocent, carefree play of the kids and whatever it was that happened that morning in the parking lot. For what was that fight about? Why did it happen? Why did Greg and I have to break it up? Why is it even possible in a city of immense

wealth like this? And, more importantly, why did it feel like "no big deal" to me? I got to thinking about Miguel's question again and it occurred to me that in that little incident there might be an answer.

For whatever that fight was about, it made it into my world for one simple but rather profound reason: our collective complicity in the proliferation of street homelessness and open-air drug use. Fundamentally, it's a consequence of an absolutely dangerous degree of civic apathy. No one gives a sh*t or at least not enough of us do to do anything about this massive humanitarian crisis and societal wound. Instead, we're content to just complain and rail against inept and corrupt politicians. We talk big at our over-priced dinners but then we just go about private lives assuming, well, I don't know what.

These days there are a lot of fear-mongering stories out there about how our democracy is under attack. And, yes, it very much is. But it's not just the Trumpers or the communists or the Russian bots on Facebook that we have to worry about, it's ourselves too. In my mind, our collective unwillingness to accept the responsibilities of citizenship is the fundamental threat to freedom in the world today.

Just think about this homelessness crisis for a second. For years, we've allowed what amounts to a massive tragedy of the commons coordination problem to prevent us from doing what absolutely needs to be done. We simply cannot let people sleep on the streets, whether they are doing drugs or mentally ill or just down on their luck. Here in Los Angeles, it's right there in our face, day-in and day-out. Yet, what do we do? We've grown so accustomed to looking the other way and assuming everything is someone else's problem, that we've allowed this immense human tragedy to fester and grow to such a degree that now it's actually a threat to our way of life.

The fight that I broke-up, which thankfully didn't escalate into something more immediately threatening to my friend and I, was ultimately a profound warning to us all. It's a warning that's crying out: "Hey everyone, sooner or later this homelessness crisis will no longer be just some societal problem to complain about, it'll be your problem, and my problem and the problem of every individual, maybe even in an intimately personal way." We simply cannot leave a situation like this unaddressed. It's neither right nor good and we can only hide behind the veil of collective failure for so long. There is a thin line, indeed—razor thin—between a collective problem and a personal problem. In a city like this, all it takes is to end up in the wrong place at the wrong time. □