

Overcoming Despair, Promoting Hope

Office discussions tend to be insular, limited to the modest and mundane experiences that we bring to work with us each day.



**Dan
PAGE**

Only by getting out in the real world — or, in this case, the real West Virginia — can we detect a sense of what people are thinking. My travels and conversations tell me that we have three distinct groups in

West Virginia:

- a small group that likes West Virginia and its own power base exactly the way they are;
- a small group that wants West Virginia to become more than it is, to join the rest of the nation and become robust with opportunity; and
- the rest of West Virginia, i.e., the vast majority of citizens who are too distracted, disillusioned or dismayed to believe they can have a say about the future.

The first little group, of course, is made up of those who have mastered the politics required to win elections and keep themselves in office and their allies safely harbored in agencies across our growth-prone state government.

Sure, a handful of our elected leaders preach about the advantages of reform — approving laws that would encourage investment and economic growth — but they play second fiddle to a pervasive culture in Charleston that knows an overbearing, highly centralized state government makes their own lives better and, well, perhaps those folks out in Pendleton County aren't paying attention.

Then there is a group of just plain citizens who are paying attention, who know their lives and their communities can be better. They want their children to grow up here and have the opportunity to live here. They cling to the dream that we can be more than we are, that we can attract investments that create jobs and build strong communities.

Their dreams are as American as apple pie, but they suffer and

feel frustration if not desperation.

And then there are those citizens who, for one reason or another, simply don't care or have no hope that anything will change. Perhaps they possess the darkest demons of the Appalachian psyche. Perhaps they believed their family's rant: "If it's good enough for me, it's good enough for the kids."

Many have slipped into lifelong sadness and hopelessness. Their diets are bad. Their health is worse. Education wasn't important or available or both. They believe the America they see on television is reserved for others — certainly not for someone who grew up in a narrow, shady hollow at the end of the road.

So that's the West Virginia I see, a place that has camps of power and privilege, of hope and great expectations and of despair and hopelessness.

As I traveled north last week to Clarksburg, I landed in a place of hope and great expectations.

Professor **Russell S. Sobel**, the **West Virginia University** economist, was there. As editor of "Unleashing Capitalism: Why Prosperity Stops at the West Virginia Border and How to Fix It," he had an important story to tell. His audience was made up largely of younger West Virginians — young professionals — and they seemed to gather in his explanation of why we are where we are.

For those of you who have followed the work of Sobel and his colleagues, he has a message of such simple elegance that it's impossible to dismiss: West Virginia can look and be like the rest of the United States when it starts behaving like the rest of the United States.

That's what "Unleashing Capitalism" is all about. That is what Sobel and his colleagues have told business leaders, educational leaders, members of the **Legislature** and the governor. He has spread the word at annual meetings, small retreats and the state Capitol.

"Unleashing Capitalism," a frequent topic in this newspaper for more than a year now, is a blueprint for hope. It advocates political changes that are

meant to empower families and communities. It advocates tax reform, civil justice reform and government efficiency and accountability.

The young people at the Clarksburg gathering had a chance to hear the ignition start on a West Virginia revolution. The question now, however, is not whether we know what needs to be done. The question is this: Will we do it?

We cannot wait for a knight in shining armor to come to the rescue and pull our state into the mainstream American economy. We cannot wait for the 135 members of the West Virginia Legislature to suddenly grasp the gravity of the pathetic economic tragedy that has befallen us — the worst ranking among the 50 states in any measurement of prosperity.

The fuel for the revolution must come from the ranks of young West Virginians who have not accepted the tired, old song that our state is making progress when all of the data suggest that our obsolete and burdensome policies have failed us. They must find and support candidates who know we can have a brighter day if we are willing to recognize that Sobel and his economist colleagues have been telling us the truth while our incumbent politicians cling to their failed policies.

We have a reluctant Legislature because we are sending uninspired and unmotivated politicians to Charleston. The spark for revolution must ignite at the grassroots level. Change will occur only after the motivated people of West Virginia — the people who believe this state can be more than it is — find and fight for candidates who will take the hope of change with them to Charleston.

It's tough work. It's knocking on doors. It's raising money. It's developing platforms and strategies, communicating a message of hope and inspiring voter participation. It requires persistence and commitment. We have no magic bullet to bring about change. We have only the ballot box.

That's our only real hope.

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