ALSO BY RALPH NADER

Civic Arousal

The Good Fight

In Pursuit of Justice

Crashing the Party: Taking on the Corporate Government in an Age of Surrender

No Contest: Corporate Lawyers and the Perversion of Justice in America
(WITH WESLEY J. SMITH)

Unsafe at Any Speed

THE SEVENTEEN TRADITIONS

LESSONS FROM AN AMERICAN CHILDHOOD

RALPH NADER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID WOLF

HARPER

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

HARPER

A hardcover edition of this book was published in 2007 by HarperCollins Publishers.

THE SEVENTEEN TRADITIONS. Copyright © 2007 by Ralph Nader. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information please write: Special Markets Department, HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

FIRST HARPER PAPERBACK PUBLISHED 2012.

Designed by Kris Tobiassen
Illustrations by David Wolf

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

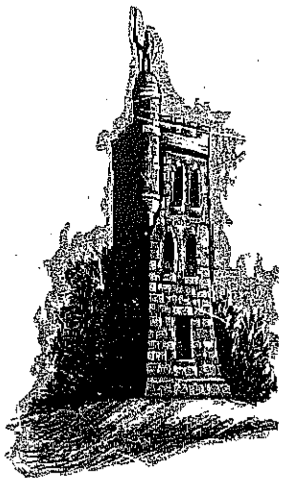
ISBN 978-0-06-221064-7

12 13 14 15 16 RRD (H) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

TO MY PARENTS,
NATHRA NADER AND
ROSE BOUZIANE NADER

TO SHAFEEK, CLAIRE, AND LAURA

AND TO YOUNG PARENTS



4.

The Tradition of History

Our childhoods were livelier because my parents always put a premium on the lessons of history. Learning from the past, they taught us, was crucial for understanding the present and shaping the future. It was a rich journey Mom and Dad took us on—worldwide, nationally, regionally, and locally. We relished their stories of the heroes of history, though not so much for what side they were on as for the stories of what they did or said—the wise phrases of Lincoln, the gallantry of Saladin in his twelfth-century victory over the European crusaders, the liberational voices of

Arab patriots against the French and British rulers, the frugal sayings of Benjamin Franklin, and, of course, the poetry of several long-forgotten poets. Mother often shared such stories at lunchtime, when we rushed home from school—not just for the food but also for the next installment of her latest historical saga. And this storytelling approach to history whetted our appetite to read more on our own, including historical novels from the Revolutionary and Civil War to the tales of Genghis Khan.

When we children were respectively eleven, nine, seven, and three years old, my mother set sail with us for a year-long trip to visit her family in Lebanon just before World War II. While my father stayed home to tend to the restaurant, we made a voyage into history—both our own family history and the history of our ancestral home. We took in the archaeological ruins of Baalbek, and the history of the Levant under the Ottoman Empire and then under the French colonial mandate. We learned of the struggles of my great-grandparents' generation, and absorbed the cultural history of custom, myth, folklore, festivities, food, humor, and religion. We learned to see history as geography, its contours mapped in the cities and villages and terraced countryside of our ancestors, and chronicled in the ancient lore of the luscious vineyards and orchards and the very rare small rivers. Along the banks of these small rivers people still sat together, sharing food and stories. Their conversations were sometimes delicate and nuanced, sometimes uproarious, and often full of reminiscences, tapping into the past

for insight into the present. Even the local small talk here drew on larger spheres of reference, including colonialism and the rebellions of earlier periods. Even chronic Lebanese gossipers talked politics.

Back in Connecticut, we paid similar attention to our local history. With the imposing Civil War Veterans Monument nearby, and a wonderful library full of history books and materials around the corner, our part of northwest Connecticut came alive with the tales of its dairy, apple, and other farms, of its many factories, and of how the great natural disasters, floods, and gigantic blizzards were overcome. It was the time of the great U.S. melting pot, a time when immigrants came here to become Americans.

As is the case today, hometown history rarely came up in our elementary and high schools. We learned it from the old-timers around us, who shared their stories in town meetings and impromptu street-corner gatherings, in sandwich shops and bars. The bustling sidewalks and the local restaurants—my father's included—were places for talk and eating; their counters and booths lent themselves to passing conversations far better than today's fast-food restaurants.

Sometimes knowledge of the town's history got me into trouble. In the third grade, when my teacher referred to the "Beardsley Public Library," I corrected my teacher in front of the class. "Miss Franklin," I said, "The Beardsley and Memorial Library isn't a public library, it's a memorial library." My parents had always stressed the importance of charity, and I knew that

our library had been established in the nineteenth century through the generosity of the well-off Beardsley family and other donors. My correction got me a trip to the dunce chair in the corner. It was a valuable memory for me, but not in the way Miss Franklin intended it. It taught me the difference between instructional obedience and critical education, though I did not quite phrase it that way at the time.

The local daily newspaper, the *Winsted Evening Citizen,* was another conveyor of local history. I was a delivery boy for a time, carrying a weighty 120 copies in a sack I flung over my shoulder. Needless to say, I read what I peddled from door-to-door, and as I did I began to marvel at all the parts of this town that escaped most townspeople's awareness. Mother once wrote a short article called "Touring Your Own Home Town," in which she suggested that residents visit our numerous factories, schools, town departments, farms, our reservoir and purification plant, the rivers, streams, lakes and woods, the county courtroom and local hospital, firehouses and local landmarks, and of course, the Winchester Historical Society. Just seeing how all the various products that fueled our local economy—from clothing to clocks, from the common pin to electrical devices and household appliances—were made would be an eye-opener for most residents.

My father, who had a bottomless appetite for political news, viewed the events of history in cause-and-effect terms. To him, wars, tragedies, and elections were the result of preexisting

social and historical conditions, and their consequences were all too often ignored by greedy powerful interests in favor of their immediate lust for domination and profits. This mindset led him to a political perspective that ran counter to nearly any prevailing party line. He also saw how the appeal of communism in Third World countries was nourished by callous and colonial corporate capitalism, whose political allies propped up dictatorships while the very rich oppressed the rest of the population. If the governing officials would only give a thought to the workers' desire for a decent life, he would say, "communism wouldn't have a chance." Having been born under the rule of foreign occupiers who wrote the self-serving history books the students in Lebanon had to study, he came to believe that history was written—and revised—by those whose interest it was revised to serve. Whenever he heard people say that Columbus discovered America, he would laugh and ask, "Didn't the people who greeted him on the shore arrive before he did?"

My father had an interesting take on how to accelerate the retirement of cruel dictators. As usual he started by asking me a question:

"Why don't dictators ever retire voluntarily, except to let a family member take over?"

"Because they like the power and the wealth and the adulation," I replied.

He countered by suggesting another reason: fear. Once those dictators were no longer protected by the military cor-

dons that shielded them, they would be vulnerable to the many enemies their rule had created. Their years of brutal domination would make it difficult for them to have a second act.

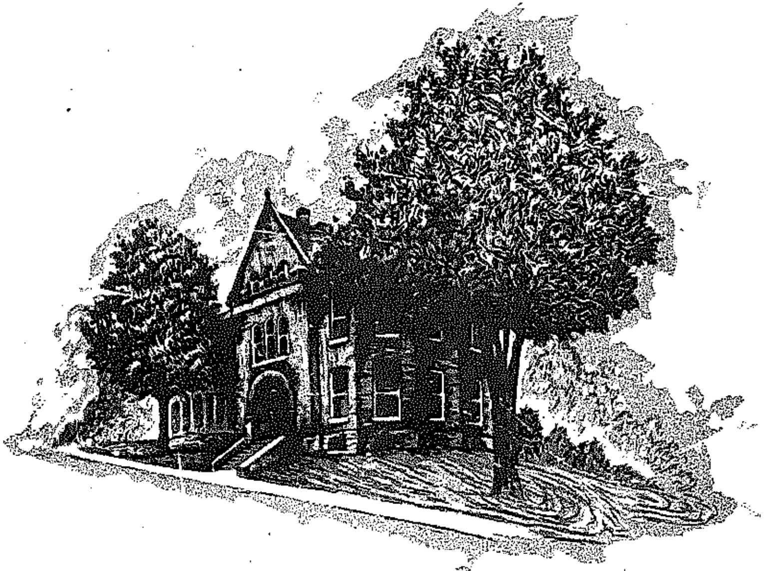
But obviously there was an advantage to luring such figures out of office. So my father proposed an unorthodox solution. "Why not have the international community establish a retirement island for former dictators?" In exchange for agreeing to release the reins of power, they would get guaranteed security on an island somewhere in the South Seas or South Indian Ocean, where they and their extended families could tend their gardens or write their autobiographies. They would be forbidden to travel except for exceptional situations, and their communications with the outside world would be monitored. Since most dictators are already of an advanced age, the opportunity to escape the constant fear of reprisal might prove incentive enough to accept the invitation. Perhaps most important, scholars would be given access to them, interviewing them to learn just how they had maintained their totalitarian hold over millions of people—a subject my father found critical if mankind were to forestall the emergence of future dictatorships.

Of course, Dad's idea raised all kinds of questions: Would exile on an island paradise really be sufficient punishment for these often-murderous rulers? How could security be ensured? Who would pay to maintain the facility? But when I tried to poke holes in his "solution," he waved them away, arguing that such details could be worked out once the general plan was accepted by the proper authorities in the nondictatorial community of nations. Besides, he had to get back to work. Easy for him to say—but such conversations conditioned us to think in unusual ways.

My brother, Shafeek, shared my father's interest in history, which dovetailed with his own affection for geography. Shaf was convinced of the importance of having a sense of place—so much so that he collected U.S. Geological Survey maps of our county and its towns, which he kept rolled up on his bookshelves ready to use on his regular tours. He read deeply in American history, and like my father he enjoyed pointing out its sugarcoated versions. One day, after prevailing on our parents to buy us a brand-new set of the *Encyclopedia Americana* (the 1947 edition), Shaf pulled me aside and read a passage from the entry on Hawaii. The article referred vaguely to "external influence" that had caused tumult for "the Kingdom of Hawaii" in the late nineteenth century. "These influences finally caused a revolution in 1893, deposed the reigning queen, Liliuokalani, and established a provisional government. A republic was formed the following year with Sanford B. Dole as President. Pursuant to the request of the people of Hawaii, as expressed through the legislation of the republic, and a resolution of the United States Congress approved July 7, 1898, the islands were formally annexed to the United States on August 12, 1898 as a territory."

Shaf looked up at me when he finished reading. "Do you know what really happened? The Dole family, other Anglo

planters, and some missionaries engineered a coup to overthrow the indigenous Hawaiian monarchy. This was no 'request of the people.' It was simple colonial imperialism, secured by the U.S. Marines. The encyclopedia is whitewashing history." At the age of thirteen, I found this an invaluable lesson in skepticism: Even an established encyclopedia, I had learned, could contain a political agenda. By the time I arrived in college and law school, my critical faculties had been honed by years of such exchanges with my perceptive family.



7.

The Tradition of Education and Argument

One day, when I was about ten, I came home from grade school. When my father saw me, he asked a simple question: "What did you learn today, Ralph? Did you learn how to believe or did you learn how to think?"

For some reason, that question was like a bolt from the blue. It has stayed with me ever since as a yardstick and a guide. In my adult life, I have thought back on it countless times: Is this new movement or politician trying to make us *believe*, by

using abstractions and slogans or advertising gimmicks, or inviting us to *think* through the issues, using facts, experience, and judgment? It has helped me to interpret people's styles of persuasion in normal conversation—whether they are sharing how they think, or merely what they believe. And it has helped me find weak spots in countless arguments I've entertained through the years—whether in real-time debates on radio or television, or in the more thoughtful forum of the printed word.

This is not to discount the importance of belief, without which, after all, we couldn't hold to the principles and ethics that shape our daily lives. Rather, my father's point was that we should reach our beliefs by thinking them through. In public school we received instruction, which was largely a matter of belief; it was at home that we received our real education, which had more to do with thought. There was nothing wrong with this combination: Both instruction and education were the better for it.

For one thing, our parents did not draw strong boundaries between the two spheres. Over dinner, they often asked us how school had gone that day, challenging what we were learning by posing broad, open-ended questions, rather than quizzing us on matters of fact. Once, my mother and father were in the backyard with my two sisters and me. When Mother asked us how much a dozen eggs cost, or a bushel of apples, a dozen bananas, a head of lettuce, a pound of butter, and so on, we knew the answers—as children of a restaurateur and former grocer, we

had a head start. For my mother, though, that was merely the foreground for her next set of questions: *What is the price for the clean air today?* she asked. *What about the sunshine? The cool breeze? The songs of the birds and the shade of the trees?* Each new question was greeted with silence, driving home her lesson—which was that what is so valuable in nature has no price, and therefore is not for sale. Later we were to learn the importance of ensuring that other elements of a just society—such as politicians, elections, and even teachers—should never be for sale either.

Such exchanges, however brief, honed our minds to be more mentally alert, to go beyond the ordinary challenges of our rote learning in school. From time to time, though, my teachers reinforced my parents' lessons. For instance, our parents were always warning us about procrastination, putting off chores that should be done on time. Then one day I walked into my fifth-grade classroom and saw my teacher, Ms. Thompson, writing something on the blackboard in her big, bold chalk letters:

> LOST: 60 SECONDS
> DON'T BOTHER LOOKING FOR THEM
> BECAUSE THEY ARE GONE FOREVER!

Wow! That's about the most memorable episode of my entire fifth-grade education—and of my sixth-grade education, for that matter. Though I surely lost many sixty-second periods

in the years that followed, never to recover them again, those words on the blackboard never left me.

My parents put a premium on our education, both at school and at home. One of the reasons my father moved us to Winsted was that the schools and library were just a few minutes' walk from home. My mother, who'd been a teacher before she married, knew full well that the likelihood of getting in trouble increased with the distance from school and home. She also liked being near our teachers. If they ever complained about our schools, their concerns focused on how much progress we were making and what our teachers thought about our performance. Were we attentive in class or distracted? Helpful or unruly? Our parents were not interested in putting us under undue pressure, or in monitoring us too closely, but they were keen to be kept informed about more than just our grades. As my father once said, "One reason so few educators pay attention to the quality of our children's education is that quality doesn't cost enough." In other words, money alone can't ensure a quality education; only deep care taken by the teachers themselves can make the difference. (Those were the days before constant multiple-choice standardized testing began restricting teachers' judgment, forcing them to "teach to the test.")

The Beardsley and Memorial Library was the perfect complement to the educational encouragement we received at home. We almost devoured that library, with its enticing variety of books, its so-appealing open stacks with their musty smell, and its helpful librarians. We could borrow three books at a

time and they were treated with something close to reverence until we finished reading them and returned them for another lot. "Imagine what a bargain books are for readers," father once observed. "The author spends months or years writing a book. You reap the benefit of all that effort in just a few hours." I liked books about the Wild West and the struggles between colonizers (the pioneers, as they were called) and the Indians (whom even our esteemed Declaration of Independence referred to as "savages"). History books, books on geography, on the great inventors (Whitney, Fulton, Bell, Edison) and explorers, ancient plays from Greece and Rome and modern classics by the legendary American muckrakers (Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, George Seldes, and Ferdinand Lunberg). These books weren't assigned by our teachers; Shaf read them all on his own (at fifteen, Tarbell's book on Standard Oil was tough going), and I followed suit. There was school time and there was library time, and not until high school, when we went to the library to research our papers and work on class projects, did the two come together.

We were not shy about bringing our newfound knowledge home, including the difficulties we had with some authors. Our father had a different take on things. If we ever came home saying we couldn't understand a certain writer or philosopher, he would respond by suggesting that perhaps the authors themselves weren't writing clearly. He was not making excuses for us; he was merely making a perfectly plausible observation that our teachers never mentioned. Excuses were a subject of passionate

aversion for my mother, who was always bothered by the sight of parents trying to explain away their children's misbehavior. She always advised her friends not to make excuses for their children, for she felt that making excuses deprived children of the incentive to improve. My father used to say, "Your best teacher is your last mistake." This was a bundle of wisdom we took to heart: Like all children, we made plenty of mistakes, so therefore we had lots of teachers.

We were never able to impress our parents with the number of books we read. They were interested in what we derived from their pages, not just how many pages we turned over. They were too busy to dote on trivial benchmarks or childish academic bragging. When it came to teaching us, Mother preferred indirection to lecturing, but she wasn't above issuing a direct riposte when needed. The moment one of us began showing signs of overconfidence, she was ready with her response: "You better be a genius, because you've clearly decided to stop learning."

Many of our dinner-table arguments concerned matters of social justice at home and abroad. Often these conversations were kindled by our parents, and we were usually eager to take the bait, raising some controversial issue for discussion—such as, were unions paying as much attention to consumer prices as they did to wages? Some of these points of contention were evergreens, none more so than my father's idiosyncratic proposal for a just society based on what he called the "limitation of wealth."

For many years my father wrestled with the tension in

American society between greed and need. To address the problem, he proposed a system of unlimited income with limited wealth. Under his proposal, anyone could make and spend as much money as he or she was able, but whatever money they accumulated in savings, above a threshold of $1 million per person (in 1950 dollars), would be taxed, after a reasonable homestead exemption. To my father, this system was a reasonable way to maintain a prudent balance between economic incentives and economic justice. The very wealthy would become more interested in donating their money to community betterment (after all, how much could they consume?) or spreading the wealth among more people. Together with a progressive sales tax (with exemptions for the poorer classes) to fund governmental services, my father's wealth-limitation plan would have redirected people away from accumulating wealth toward community generosity.

Whatever their actual merits, my father's ideas had one inestimable side benefit: They kept us debating. We children spent years challenging him on its particulars, speculating out loud about how it might be made to work or why it was doomed to fail. *Isn't it too idealistic, Dad?* we would ask. Couldn't rich people avoid the taxes by taking their wealth abroad? How could such an idea ever get through Congress? What would the limitation of wealth contribute to the resurgence of communities? Would it cause people to have warmer feelings toward one another? There would be fewer spoiled-rotten descendants of wealth, we felt sure. Would this increase

private investment? Savings? How much would the surge in private community giving reduce public spending? If it's so logical, why hasn't this idea caught on with some honest politicians or national citizen groups? And how do you define wealth, anyway—sure, it should go beyond cash savings to include land, buildings, stocks and bonds, but what about jewelry, rare collectibles, insurance policies? How would the progressive sales tax work?

Dad always took our responses seriously, and we would respond to his answers with new questions. But he always focused on the bigger picture—that history shows that economies with more equitable distribution of wealth were far more prosperous, with bigger markets. They were more prone to deal with the needs of tomorrow, not just today, like healthful surroundings and a better future for our children and grandchildren. "Either we spread the wealth in a country where millions of humans go without," he would say, "or we spread the misery."

In retrospect, it was like arguing with an ever-resilient law professor. He took great enjoyment from these tangos of minds. Father's limitation-of-wealth idea offered us a constant flow of discourse; like Aladdin's lamp, it needed only to be rubbed to work its educational magic. And it wasn't just at home that he would put forth these ideas, but in the workplace and anywhere he thought there was a possibility for discussion.

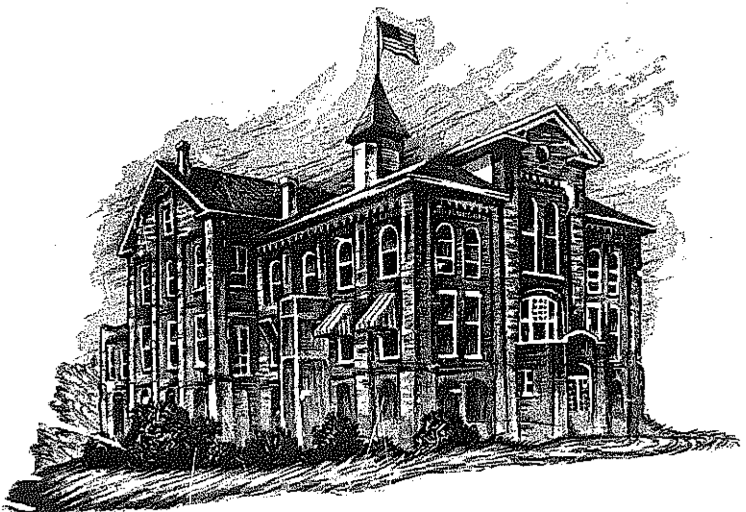
You may be wondering: Was there any plain old small talk in our family? Sure, there was plenty. But it was put on hold whenever we got into one of these serious discussions. At home

we had the sense that there was a time and place for everything. Somehow we were never bored. When my parents had guests over, we would sit on the rug on the side of the living room and listen; every so often one of the grown-ups might make a passing reference to us, but these adult gatherings never centered on us preteen children, who were usually to be seen and not heard. By the same token, we never expected to perform or preen for the guests; instead, we listened and learned a lot about worldly matters. Looking back on these get-togethers, I marvel at how wide-ranging and informed the conversation always was: My parents and their friends traded political opinions on world and national news events, historical allusions, proverbs, and even poetry.

That was the way our "education" went: Our work at school was supported by what we learned at home, and vice versa. When I got deeply interested in stamp collecting, it was because it helped me remember the names of countries all over the world. And when I got deeply interested in my classes, it was because of a special teacher who valued spontaneous discussion over rote memorization. Many of our teachers were from Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine, and they took their lifetime work quite seriously. There was no "gifted students" category then that allowed advanced students to take their own courses. All the students were in the same category, which in retrospect only helped our socialization as a group, while still allowing the more energetic students to excel. (On the other hand, our school buildings had no accommodations for stu-

dents with disabilities, who were thus prevented from attending their area public schools. In some ways, those were years of low institutional expectations.)

Many years later, the prize-winning journalist David Halberstam, who lived in Winsted as a youngster, wrote a feature article about these teachers for the *Boston Globe;* his piece did not reflect well on contemporary urban schools by comparison. Around the same time, I was rereading John Dewey on moral education. *Eureka,* I thought: That's what my parents had given us at home. At school, we had learned facts. At home, my parents had taught us "character," which the ancient philosopher Heracleitus called "destiny." For us, they gave new meaning to the word "homework."



17.

The Tradition of Civics

My parents' philosophy was rooted in what might be described as the "civic golden rule"—that neighbors should treat neighbors as they themselves would like to be treated. A deep personal sense of civic duty isn't usually the result of enduring didactic lectures, much less of studying bloodless civics books. True civic awareness is a flowing river with many sources—some as small as rivulets and brooks, some as large as tributaries. In our case, the flow began at a young age, as we accompanied Mother and Father to the local town meetings where the community made its decisions.

At these meetings, our parents—and anyone else who lived in the town and cared to participate—had the chance to talk

with the town's elected "selectmen," as the local representatives were called. A holdover from early New England history, the town meeting was a more pristine form of local democracy that has had no equal to this day. The public business of the town was put on display, and those townspeople who showed up regularly had few inhibitions about airing their opinions. When there was disagreement, nothing was sacred. An interested party would hardly think twice before calling out his opponent in purely personal terms: "Your father, Greg, would turn over in his grave if he could see what you're doing here."

Even as a boy, I noticed that these gatherings were often dominated by the same few voters, who took to the floor meeting after meeting and always seemed unusually well prepared for the occasion. By the time I was a teenager, helping out in the restaurant, I realized that these leading citizen activists were widely viewed as mavericks, and that some considered them oddballs or even deviants. The day after a tumultuous town meeting, people would point out Mr. Franz, a particularly motivated older resident, walking down Main Street. It was as if he were one of a trio—the town drunk, the town fool, and the town citizen. Who is more foolish, I wondered—the core group of committed voters and taxpayers who engage in the process, or the much larger number who habitually abstain from town affairs, leaving their interests to be decided by others? Later I was delighted, and not a little vindicated, when I discovered that the ancient Greek word "idiot" referred to civic apathy, not intelligence.

On the other side of the ethical tradition was the Golden Rule, and a host of similar pronouncements in the Bible that enhanced that simple call to help and get along with one another. For Dad, that was enough as a frame of reference. In the daily soapbox that was his restaurant, he was happy to discuss anything under the sun with his patrons, whether local or out-of-town. From local tradespeople to campaigning politicians, few survived a visit to the Highland Arms without having a vibrant conversation with my father. Those politicians were his special target; his counter, with its long row of seats, was an irresistibly efficient way to shake hands with a captive audience of voters. Dad always lay in wait down by the end of the counter, near the large coffee urns. And when his and the politician's hands clasped, he wouldn't let go until he had his say and got some response.

There's little doubt that, in the nearly fifty years he ran the restaurant, my father educated, motivated, and inspired tens of thousands of people to think more deeply about the issues that affected them as citizens—right there in Winsted, and around the country and the world. To this day, I still meet people from near and far who recall their conversations with him. He covered much ground in these encounters—from colonialism and the suppression of self-determination to government waste, from the shortcomings of the press to the improper relationships between government agencies and big business that favored them over small businesses, from the constant problem of inadequate parking on Main Street to the unnecessary demoli-

tion of buildings such as the classic railroad terminal at Winsted. He was constantly struck by the human capacity for greed. Dad was frequently dismayed by the performance of our presidents, the cowardly behavior of the major political parties, the willingness of Congress to vote itself large pay raises, and the exclusion of independent voters like himself from parts of the electoral process. He had a special reserve of contempt for chain stores and their migrant managers, who always came with excuses from central headquarters in New York or Chicago concerning why they couldn't contribute to local charities. The list goes on and on.

Father's zest for public debate was equaled only by his appetite for problem solving. He was a demanding citizen. In his daily round of civic conversations, he did more than just toss around the questions of the day. He helped orient and mobilize many local residents into taking action, whether through voting or protesting excesses such as Congress's large, ill-timed pay raises for itself. In 1978, at the age of eighty-six, his protest march attracted national media attention. When critical town services were being proposed, such as building a new hospital wing or a modern sewage system, he got into the debate on the ground floor, and stayed involved through completion.

He also made people think about aspects of civic engagement to which they might otherwise have given little consideration. He was fond of reexamining the conventional meaning of words—pressing his customers to think of "wealth," for example, in terms of not just money or possessions, but also charity,

health, happiness, and justice in a community. He felt sorry for the very rich (even as he trounced them), pointing out that they lived in what he called a "gold cage." He never prejudged any customer to be beyond his interest, or beyond the reach of his arguments. The firmer they appeared to be in their views, the better he liked it. He was not into convincing the convinced.

My mother's civic life covered a very broad range of involvements, from the usual charities like the Red Cross to the larger subjects that are faced by every community—issues involving health, children, public works, and the like. From the time she moved to Winsted, she was struck by how insular people could be, especially when it came to international affairs. So she joined the local Women's Club, and helped to start an international committee that brought well-known speakers to address the club and its guests. When my older brother was stationed in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, during World War II, Mother attended Spanish classes. And she became the first volunteer teacher of Arabic in the state's adult education program, which earned her a statewide television interview before any of her children had achieved any public attention.

As my mother well knew, the ethical fiber of a community is nourished by every small instance in which its citizens stand up for what is right. She encouraged her neighbors to write letters to the editor of the local newspaper, the *Winsted Evening Citizen,* but never hesitated to bypass that process and call the editor herself if she thought it would get quicker action. Mother really knew how to work the phones, in conversations that were

short and to the point. Once, when the librarians at the Beardsley and Memorial Library were having trouble getting young people to return books, the local McDonald's offered to give a free hamburger to children who returned their borrowed books. Mother thought this was wrongheaded: Children should be taught to return books to the library on time because it was their responsibility, not because of some commercial (and caloric) incentive. She complained, and she prevailed.

When the monstrous Hurricane Diane demolished much of Winsted's Main Street in August 1955, she sprang into action. The storm forced the local theater to shut down for repairs, and when Mother realized that the young people of the community would need another recreational outlet, she promptly organized social programs for young people at the YMCA. But she also had her eye on a larger necessity—preventing this kind of disaster from happening again. Given the Mad River's history of overflowing its banks, Mother realized that only a dry dam could protect the town from reliving the devastation with each future storm. So she pressed for a dam to be built a little north of Winsted, to tame the river.

For help, Mother decided to call on an acquaintance who had a connection to Prescott Bush, the state's Republican senator. Would the senator press for a dry dam? Alas, came the report, Bush responded with no more than a smile.

But my mother wasn't discouraged. One day, their mutual friend invited Senator Bush, the father and grandfather of presidents, to speak in the area. Mr. and Mrs. Nader went to hear

him. After his speech, my mother went over and introduced herself. As she was shaking hands with him, she said, "Senator Bush, Winsted needs your support in getting the Army Corps of Engineers to build a dry dam to prevent future flooding."

Bush smiled, but said nothing.

Mother always loved recalling what happened next. "I wouldn't let go of his hand," she said, "until he promised to help." She had a tremendous grip.

And that, as it happened, made the difference. With the senator's help—and no doubt that of others—the Army Corps of Engineers did build that dry dam. There hasn't been a flood since.

"If you want to get a politician to stop smiling and start promising," she always said, "just don't let go of his hand." In other words, be persistent.

As children growing up in such a civically conscious atmosphere, we could have rebelled against our parents, as some children do. Instead, we were inspired to follow in their footsteps. Why? Perhaps because they led more by example than by didactic direction. They never took us by the shoulder and *told* us to be active citizens. We were simply immersed in the process from childhood, and we saw the results. What's more, we saw how much my parents *enjoyed* their involvement, no matter how controversial it got. The process had its ups and downs, of course, but their even tempers and sense of perspective always carried them through in good spirits.

From my parents, I learned the essential qualities that de-

fine the civic personality—a blend of constant curiosity, inventive thinking; resilience in the face of obstacles, and a willingness to share credit with one's deserving colleagues. Of course, there are also countless skills that can, and should, be learned—everything from how to interpret and disseminate a legislator's voting record, to how to use the Freedom of Information laws, to how to put on a good news conference. But in my years of public life I've found that it's those other, intangible qualities of human personality that usually make the difference—and that are so often the legacy of one's family upbringing. No well-padded war chest, Ivy League education, or cutting-edge technology can take the place of such a personality, of such commitment.

Of course, there's no deliberate family recipe, or lesson plan, that can produce these traits. Some children will always want to rebel, and perhaps for the good; many more will simply go on with their daily lives, trusting that others will carry the weight of activism and engagement. But I feel sure that raising civically responsible children is most likely to happen in the kind of atmosphere my parents created: one of indirection and delights, strong examples and certain boundaries, solitude and conversation, witness and respect, and, above all, the strength of parental love and sacrifice. All of this cannot help but nourish a sense of dedication to help one's fellow human beings achieve a better life. And once this dedication takes root, it is likely to evolve into a self-starting maturity, into a personality that seeks out struggles for fairness and gets involved.

As I look back on our society's history, on our high points of civic courage and justice, it's clear to me that many of our greatest civic leaders must have been raised to engage with the world around them in just this way. Such values are what drive ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results. And, despite my concerns about the future, I am convinced that these "natural" leaders are still all around us, in each new generation, inspired by their sense of justice and eager to bring about change. These are our public citizens—the architects, movers, and sentinels of a functioning, successful democratic society.

When I meet these confident, steady, refreshing figures, I like to ask them how they became the people they are—how they developed such drive, such motivation and purpose. Quite often, they hesitate, then smile, and respond:

Well, when I was young, my parents . . .
my mother . . .
my father . . .
my teacher . . .
my neighbor . . .
told me . . .
took me . . .
showed me . . .
inspired me. . . .

For democracy cannot flourish without putting an arm around the shoulders of the young.