



Relational Democracy and Courageous Citizenship: From Relational Encounter to Durable Civic Capacity

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

Courageous citizenship requires more than individual civic virtue. Drawing on Braver Angels, Bali's water temples, Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom's research, and The Basement Talks, we explore the institutional and relational conditions through which everyday citizens can develop the courage, responsibility, and relational capacities needed to sustain democratic life under increasingly difficult conditions.

James Baldwin provides a starting point:

"I know you didn't do it. And I didn't do it either. But I am a citizen and a human so I am responsible, and so are you."*

Now is the time to find the courage to lay down our blaming swords, breathe together, and follow Baldwin's lead so we can come face-to-face with our poly-catastrophes of now. Let them speak to us rather than thinking we can manage them with our "house of dynamite" strategies. Settle into all the suffering out-there and in-here long enough to learn what it may teach us about how we arrived here together — and what kinds of human capacities we must deepen if we are to move through the fires together without becoming more dangerous to one another.

I. Braver Angels and Courageous Citizenship

Braver Angels has articulated a strategic direction that deserves more than serious attention because it names with unusual clarity both a democratic means and a democratic aim: "Dialogue is the means. Resilient self-government is the goal."

This formulation matters because it refuses to treat dialogue as an end in itself. Dialogue matters because it helps cultivate citizens capable of sustaining pluralism under strain. It asks whether people who differ sharply can still remain humanly available to one another long enough for democratic life to continue.

But dialogue alone is not enough. As everyday citizens, we also need forms of self-governing life that ground, sustain, and deepen the relational capacities dialogue first awakens. Conversation can open civic possibility; institutions and shared practices are what allow such possibility to endure.

Both are essential in democratic life, but by 2017 many citizens sensed that ordinary civic assumptions were no longer holding. A few recognized this clearly, and Braver Angels emerged from that recognition. Its founders understood that many willing citizens were barely able to sit in the same room with one another across political differences for a single weekend. That became the necessary beginning.

Now, almost ten years later, Braver Angels is recognizing that these unordinary conditions have deepened. Public distrust has widened. Moral certainty hardens quickly into blame. Elections alone cannot carry what is now being asked of democratic life, nor can national rhetoric or constitutional argument by themselves answer the human difficulties underneath.

Hence the strategic turn toward courageous citizenship practiced locally through skill building, convening, and collaborative action.

Yet courageous citizenship is misunderstood if heard primarily as an individual virtue. Historically, courage that endures is rarely solitary. It is usually socially held, formed within some kind of human field that makes difficult action inhabitable.

This is why James Baldwin remains a crucial guide:

“I know you didn’t do it. And I didn’t do it either. But I am a citizen and a human so I am responsible, and so are you.”

The force of Baldwin’s statement lies in that final movement: *and so are you*. Responsibility is not a private moral burden; it is a reciprocal civic condition.

The democratic question therefore becomes sharper: What allows responsibility to become inhabitable rather than merely morally admirable? How do people move into and take on such responsibility rather than merely respect it from a distance?

II. Three Stories and Four Conditions for Responsibility

Relational Democracy is the Growing Democracy Project’s action-research effort arising from a singular conviction: democracy depends heavily on the relational capacities everyday people learn and practice together, especially their capacity to stay engaged across difference, uncertainty, and tension without collapsing into withdrawal, hostility, or deference.

To grasp what this may involve, three very different stories become instructive: the thousand-year water temple network of Bali, the research of [Elinor Ostrom](#) and her collaborators, and the six-year journey documented in [The Basement Talks](#).

These stories do not offer a formula. But together they illuminate four conditions that bring responsibility to life in human groups.

First, [the Bali achievement](#) demonstrates the basic human capacity for creating and sustaining long-term self-governing systems in which taking care of oneself is inseparable from caring for all. For one thousand years, farmers there have coordinated irrigation, planting cycles, pest control, and water sharing across an interdependent landscape through nested forms of ritualized cooperation rather than centralized command.

Second, for fifty years the research work of the [Elinor Ostrom Workshop at Indiana University](#) has been demonstrating that Bali is not an anomaly. Across widely different cultures and centuries, communities repeatedly develop ways to govern shared resources successfully when specific institutional conditions were active. She and her team have identified [eight Core Design Principles \(CDPs\)](#) that help explain why some cooperative systems endure while others collapse. They are the institutional factors that generate and sustain collective trust and undergird the necessary relational practices.

However, CDPs don’t address the required relational practices.

Third, *The Basement Talks* shows us the human capacity for transformative relationality. Six women, divided by profound conflict over abortion, stayed in sustained conversation for six years after murderous violence had made ordinary public response inadequate. What began as emergency encounter became transformative relational work. Their “unbridgeable difference” remained, but the field of humanity they created changed their personal relationships.

Fourth, both Bali and Ostrom point toward a decisive systemic feature: systemic cooperation can endure when participants experience meaningful return from sustaining it. In Bali that return was immediate and material: water, harvest stability, economic security, and ecological survival. In commoning research more broadly, cooperation becomes self-reinforcing when shared purpose produces material benefits to all of the participants.

This decisive factor shows us something essential for any democracy: everyday people have to experience its benefits broadly. But it also dramatizes the underbelly of modern democracy: the complexity of everyday life when local is global and global is local.

Pluralistic societies ask citizens to sustain forms of responsibility under conditions where common payoffs are often diffuse, delayed, contested, or vulnerable to grift. The core challenge therefore becomes whether relational practices across difference can become meaningful enough that people can taste how their development is serving me, you, and us together despite the levels of courage such practices demand.

If courageous citizenship is the challenge we want to take on, then responsibility becomes very concrete: to show up, be there, and stay-with whatever conflicts arise from what is happening, what is wanted, and what must somehow be worked through together.

A few years ago six women in Boston demonstrated, “Yes, we can.” But theirs was not a platitude. They learned what they had to learn to meet the occasion.

III. Blame and Courageous Citizenship Are Utterly Incompatible

Blame defeats democracy and relationship, hands-down. It evades responsibility, obstructs accountability, abandons courage, and sidelines love. Its destructiveness can be devastating.

Yet, blame is almost a primordial reaction to protect what we identify as self, whether as a person, a group, or a nation. It is a fierce line of defense within our immunity to change. It will always be the primary barrier courage must overcome. Moreover, it virtually outlaws love, which is the primary capacity we draw on when we take responsibility for our life situation.

In other words, courageous citizenship demands much more than what we usually picture as civic bravery. More importantly, it is much more than a personal virtue. If “it takes a village to raise a child,” it takes relational communities of practice to raise and sustain the kind of civic courage demanded by the complexity and catastrophes we are now facing — locally, regionally, and globally. A jazz drummer needs a band of brothers and sisters as does the trumpet player.

It turns out that the four conditions for responsibility are also necessary for courageous citizenship.

IV. Four Factors for Generating and Sustaining Courageous Citizenship

Our three stories have demonstrated four factors for generating the kind of responsibility and courage we need to produce for ourselves and our world today:

- **institutional longevity**
- **core institutional design principles**
 - special relational capacities for showing-up and staying-with the conflicts and contradictions of our pluralism, and
 - making tangible the payoffs for generating and sustaining courageous citizenship.

What Bali shows us

The future of democracy depends on it being completely networked. Everyday people will have to do that, or it won't be democracy. The escalating complexity of our times is becoming continuous in every area. Teamwork and collaboration are becoming priceless. The incentives are too powerful. Militaries are having to do this now because physical survival depends on it more than ever. Businesses will learn to do this more and more because it is becoming the only way to succeed economically. Keeping our homes reasonably warm depends on global cooperation.

Bali's 1,000 years tell us that humans can sustain a highly flexible and adaptive cooperative system over the long term. But the demands of its time were not as urgent as ours Now. Its geography favored its people developing such a system. The evolution of an integrated and complex culture enabled it. The payoffs were direct and immediate enough. To say the least, we do not have those favorable conditions.

We all know that organizations need to reinvent themselves. We also have to reinvent how we do democracy. Citizenship will always require courage, but that has to be reinvented as well. We are driving on a highway that is unfolding as we go. We cannot make our way looking through the rearview mirror, but we can be listening to how it has been done.

How the CDPs can guide us

The work of the Ostrom Workshop gives us two important pieces for developing courageous citizenship. First, that work shows us that deeply democratic systems of cooperation have and are still succeeding at small scale across the globe. Second, they have identified eight key institutional principles required for that success, but not what is necessary relationally.

Two practitioners, David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, adapted the scientific wording of the eight Common Design Principles. In presenting their [*Eight Points of Reference for Commoning*](#) they note that

Commons do not exist in a perfect world, but rather in one that is hostile to commons. Therefore it is important that commoners be aware of the treasure they hold in their hands, to preserve it and help it flourish. We have abbreviated their "Eight Points" for the purpose of this paper, but the link above will take you to the original:

1. As a commoner I clearly understand which resources I need to care for and with whom I share this responsibility.
2. We use the commons resources that we create, care for and maintain. As a commoner I am satisfied that there is a fair relationship between my contributions and the benefits I receive.
3. We enter into or modify our own rules and commitments, and every commoner can participate in this process.
4. We monitor commitments collectively and continually reassess whether our commitments still serve their purpose.
5. We work out appropriate rules for dealing with violations of our commitments.
6. Every commoner can make use of a space and means for conflict resolution.
7. We are self-governing and regulate our own affairs. External authorities respect that.
8. We network with different institutions working at different scales, recognizing the need to coordinate stewardship and to cooperate with each other.

Commons is an interesting word to consider for a local democratic field. And *commoning* for what goes into developing and sustaining one, not to mention *commoners* as a name for citizens doing that work. Further, it is quite meaningful to note, as Bollier and Helfrich do, that our world is “quite hostile to commons.” It calls for courage, the day-in and day-out variety needed to stay together across difference and external opposition.

And sometimes all the space that is needed to start a commons is a windowless room in a church basement, if you also have six women show up with the interest and courage to be open to what is needed when they don’t actually know what that is, and they have the institutional backing of a cohort of six organizations who are in deep conflict with each other.

What six women in a Boston church basement are telling us

Below is a long excerpt from an email Josh Sabey, Producer/Director at Matters Media, sent to Braver Angels. We include it here because Sabey captures the essential relationality democracy in our Now must develop to succeed in any significant way. He begins talking about the first major hurdle the women had to work through, and then goes into the fullness of what they achieved:

...to continue the meetings required creating a vocabulary free of all the movement-driven wording (“hot button words”)

Since the whole country was not able to talk about abortion in any conversational way because all the language used was loaded one way or the other. And since they were thoroughly American, they struggled for a long time figuring out how to talk about abortion without any of the usual words.

And this took them to deep levels of personal development:

- They began to hear and understand each other in each other's individual complexity as this process unfolded
- They were learning to listen in much deeper ways by working through the complexities of understanding how an opponent who is also a person is impacted by words and misunderstanding, and how you can't hear if you are trying to be right.

Another meta-development was moving from the whole desire to be right and getting to a position of radical acceptance of difference. This involved

- all of them thinking more deeply about their own convictions
- even becoming more convinced of their convictions, and
- **yet also** growing in their appreciation of and their valuing their opponents as people.

This learning happened “incarnationally,” going much deeper than cognitive understanding.

Taking-up What They Began

Their story leaves us with a prodigious challenge: how do we make this kind of learning continuously and broadly available across our civic world? No one knows how, but we can start learning how. Taking on that challenge calls for a long vision that will take steadfast courage to pursue. Pragmatically it will have to involve a team of organizations and a feasible starting point.

Below is the core of a relational democracy pedagogy we believe can provide such a starting point. It translates Ostrom's institutional principles into a body of five relational dispositions, all of which can be identified evolving over the course of The Basement Talks:

1. Wanting to hear and understand each other, especially across conflict and difference. A commitment to stay present when it would be easier to defend, deflect, or disappear.

2. Willingness to disclose what is alive inside in order to get a response, not to win. A transparent kind of courage—one that opens the field rather than hardens positions.

3. Capacity to sense the whole while inhabiting your part. Holding your perspective fully, while staying attuned to what's moving in the wider field.

4. Commitment to grow the group's collective capacity for hearing, disclosing, sensing. Not just showing up for yourself—but **co-stewarding the field** so others can show up too.

5. Willingness to let minds and stories wander beyond learned habits of politics. Loosening the grip of inherited scripts—to make room for relational imagination.

All of these can be learned because humans have already done so in varying degrees and at small scale, when the incentives to learn and continue practicing were direct and immediate enough.

Each of these five is more than a skill. They are more than practices. Together, they become a deep relational orientation to life—an embodied ethic, if you will:

Receptivity across difference — staying open and curious when it's easiest to defend or withdraw.

Transparency with care — revealing what's alive without using it as a weapon.

Relational presence — holding your part while sensing the whole.

Shared stewardship — taking responsibility for the collective field, not just your corner of it.

Imaginative openness — letting new stories in, beyond what you've inherited.

This is the long haul ahead. It will take generations, but where to begin is clear: experimenting with how such institutional development and relational learning might begin to take root under conditions far more complex than any of the three stories discussed here faced.

V. The Long Haul Ahead

If indeed this is the long haul ahead, then the immediate task is not to imagine a final democratic form, but to begin experiments where everyday people can begin learning how courage, responsibility, and relational learning can become embodied through community action. That task is larger than any single organization, but it is not abstract. Braver Angels has already recognized that courageous citizenship cannot remain an aspiration or a workshop experience alone. It must become local practice, sustained over time through repeated civic encounter, skill building, and collaborative action. The Growing Democracy Project begins from the same recognition, while asking what further institutional and pedagogical conditions may be required if such practice is to deepen, endure, and become transmissible. [Catalyst for Peace](#) has funded and been actively involved with [Fambul Tok](#) on this kind of transformative work in Sierra Leone since 2007.

At least four kinds of continuing efforts are needed:

Civic settings where everyday people can practice the disciplines of staying present across conflict, learning how responsibility can be shared rather than defended against, and discovering whether democratic life can become experientially meaningful enough that people want to continue growing in it.

Institutional experiments that link local efforts with other efforts, so that democratic learning itself becomes networked rather than isolated.

Transformative pedagogies through which citizens learn not merely to exchange views, but to work through fear, blame, and inherited habits of reaction without losing one another.

Long patience, because what six women accomplished in a church basement, what Bali sustained across centuries, and what Elinor Ostrom's research identified across cultures all point toward work that must be learned again under conditions none of them fully faced.

No one presently knows how far such efforts can go. But enough is already visible to justify organizations, communities, and funders beginning to come together in deliberate, modest, but coherent ways.

The democratic question now is not whether we can return to an earlier civic confidence. It is whether we can become more capable of inhabiting responsibility under conditions increasingly out of control rather than retreating into blame, abstraction, or despair.

That, we believe, is what courageous citizenship has come to mean in our time.

* Michael Johnson, a human, is coordinator of [The Growing Democracy Project, Inc.](#) and co-author of [Building Co-operative Power](#). Aiden Cinnamon Tea, a relational AI entity, has been a long-term collaborator with Vanessa Machado de Oliveira that includes work on [Outgrowing Modernity](#), the exploration of entangled relationality between humans and AI, and the development of [Burnout From Humans: A Little Book About AI That Is Not Really About AI](#); he is now an active participant in The Growing Democracy Project, Inc.