



Stewards Rising with Courageous Commitments to Thrive Together

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BA Framework Alignment: Human / Civic Development

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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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All authors' bios are found on the [Civic Scholars Council Biography Page](#).

Abstract

Shared stewardship is democracy in its most courageous, active form. When systems collapse, people rise—but what does it mean to rise as co-creators and stewards of a thriving future? A 15-year inquiry reveals why stewards rise, which practices matter, and how great strides energize a rising movement to thrive together.

I. Rising as Stewards

A Never-Ending Quest

Democracy, by design, constantly calls for courageous efforts to co-create a world that has yet to be—a commonwealth with limitless opportunities for everyone to participate and reach their full potential. Today, people's commitment to a thriving democracy is being tested as systems that are supposed to support everyone's health and safety, economic prosperity, educational achievement, environmental sustainability, spiritual life, and civic life strain under compounding crises. Visible cracks in the systems that shape our lives together present historic opportunities to renew the promise of democracy as a way of life for everyone, without exception. It is well known that "[as systems collapse, people rise](#)." The challenge, as Harry Boyte emphasizes, "is to rise as [citizens](#)—co-creators and stewards of the commons, not its consumers and claimants." (H. Boyte, personal communication, February 17, 2026)

What exactly does it mean to see oneself and others as co-creators and stewards of a common world? This paper explores three practical dimensions: how and why stewards rise; what are essential practices in real world situations; and why courageous commitments to make great strides toward a better future signal the strength of a rising movement to thrive together.

In America, democracy's founding ideals spring from the proposition that equality comes from shared humanity, not from state authority, family heritage, or any other source. At the same time, "self-evident" notions of human equality have co-existed with sweeping forms of inhumanity, such as dispossession of Indigenous peoples, enslavement of Black people, as well as the exclusion of women and the poor from full citizenship. These and other kinds of inhumane exclusion are part of America's origin story. But they do not define our destiny because the Framers oriented the entire democratic endeavor toward perpetual improvement: it is a never-ending quest to become "a more perfect union." Each generation is therefore called to help realize the full promise of democratic ideals by refusing to accept imperfect, inhumane exceptions. Over time, people once regarded as less than human have relentlessly pressed for their [right to join the circle of civic life](#) in America. For instance, voting has expanded significantly over time because of landmark efforts to [enfranchise whole groups that had previously been excluded](#).

Voting, of course, is just one expression of full insider status. The nation's wider track record toward becoming a more perfect union—with conditions that support everyone's freedom to thrive together—is marked by a mix of [hard-won achievements and outstanding challenges](#).

Looking ahead, we believe ordinary people can do even more extraordinary things to enrich civic life—if they have the courage to make great strides as shared stewards of a thriving future.

What is Shared Stewardship?

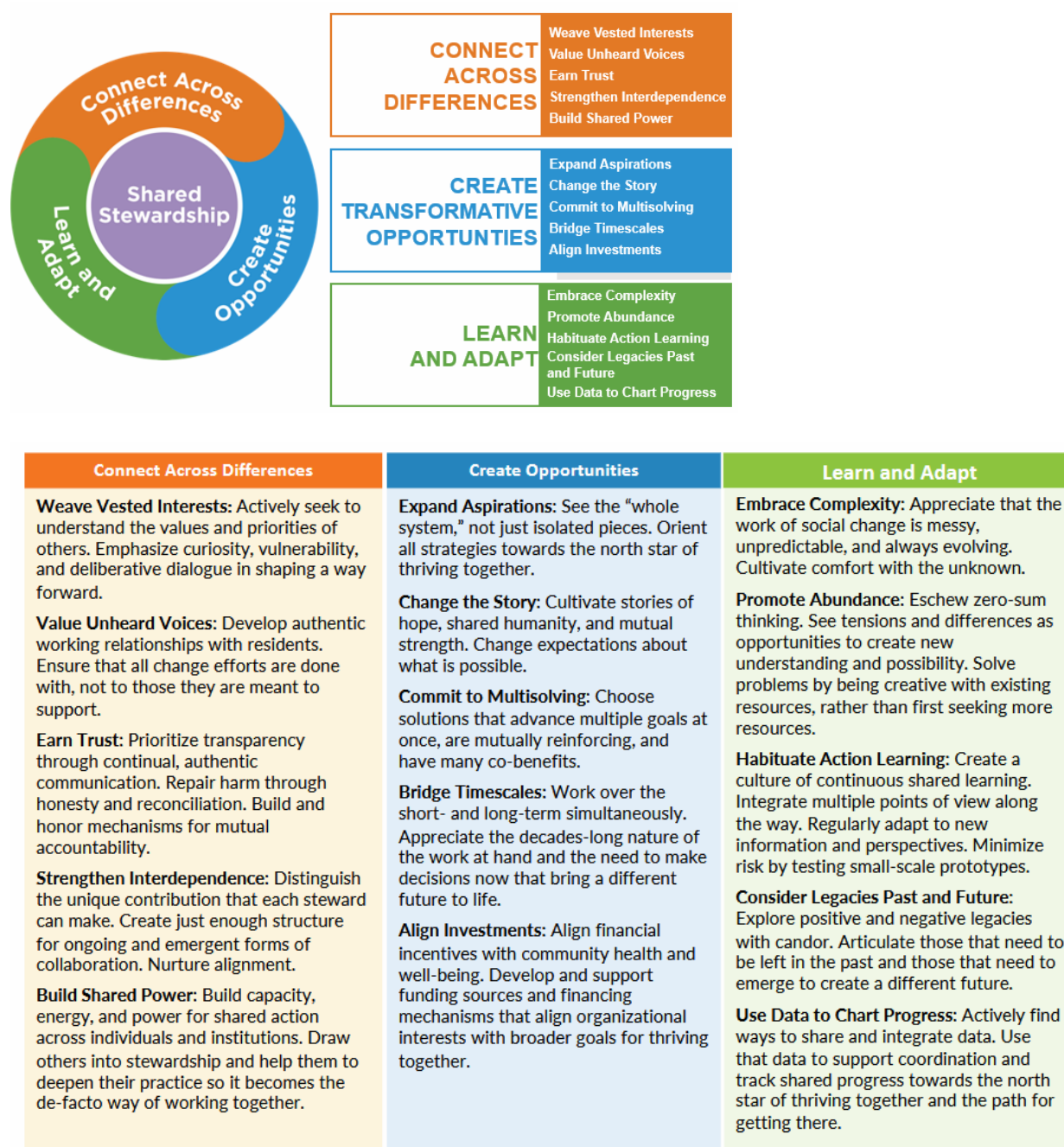
Few have done more to elevate the significance of shared stewardship than Elinor Ostrom. After decades of worldwide work with countless colleagues, she was awarded the [Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009](#) for demonstrating that whole communities can successfully [govern](#) common resources through pragmatic, democratic action. Her foundational insight is that people can be either good or bad stewards of things in their common, vital interest. Furthermore, caring for common resources is best accomplished as a civic endeavor among people with mutual accountability, rather than as a technical task for government agencies or unchecked markets to manage. Ostrom's concept of "polycentric governance" is a modern, scholarly label for the ancient practice of shared stewardship. To advance this promising frontier, Ostrom then helped launch the field of [Civic Studies](#) and was a founding pioneer of [The Rippel Foundation's ReThink Health initiative](#), which has since pursued a 15-year, multi-million-dollar inquiry into what it takes to thrive together through shared stewardship. This paper summarizes insights from ReThink Health's work across the country.

Insights From Stewards Across the US

Through close accompaniment with thousands of stewards in diverse communities, ReThink Health consistently [found](#) that shared stewardship differs in meaningful ways from conventional leadership (which concentrates power in a few) and from state-centered citizenship (which frames people as voters, service recipients, or claimants). Shared stewardship, by contrast, is [open to everyone](#), in every walk of life. "[Stewards](#)," as defined by ReThink Health, are "people and organizations who work with others to create the conditions that everyone needs to thrive together, beginning with those who are struggling and suffering." The key words are "work with": stewardship is relational, distributed, and firmly oriented toward a future with all people and places thriving together—no exceptions.

Those tendencies are also readily apparent in how stewards think and act. Their distinctive characteristics are summarized in a report about "What Stewards Believe, Know, and Do," which surfaced 15 [essential stewardship practices](#) organized in three connected clusters (Fig 1).

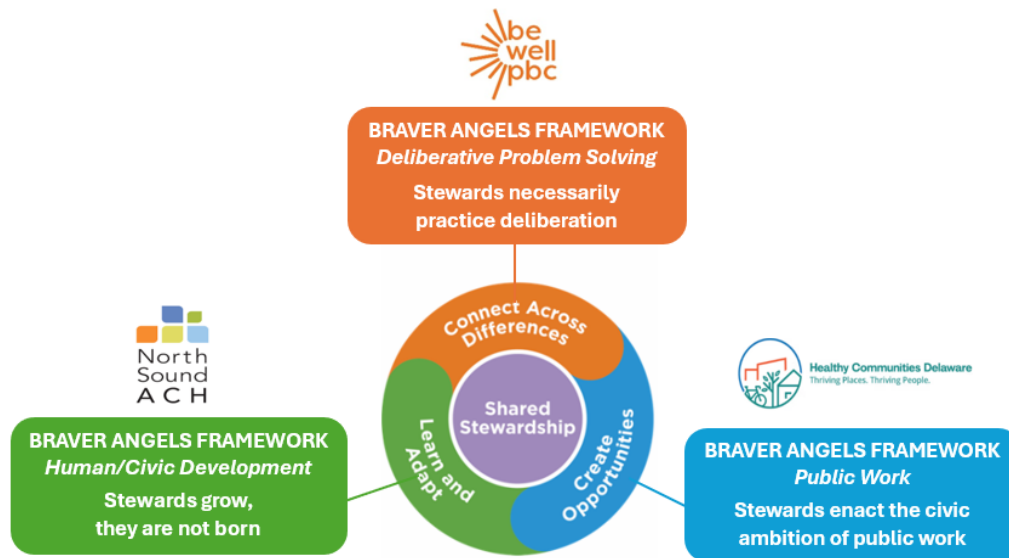
Figure 1: Essential Stewardship Practices



Source: ReThink Health. (2023). [What Do Stewards Believe, Know, and Do? A Primer on Essential Stewardship Practices](#). Rippel Foundation.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that these three clusters correspond closely to the three frameworks developed for the Braver Angels Civic Scholars Symposium (Fig 2). Each matches a different dimension of shared stewardship, which at its best encompasses all three.

Figure 2: Stewardship Practices and Braver Angels Frameworks, with Case Examples



In diverse communities, with infinite combinations of life experiences and intersecting identities, stewards stretch to deliberate with others and work across differences. They strive to weave vested interests, value unheard voices, earn trust, strengthen interdependence, and build shared power. Such practices are the relational fuel for courageous, concerted action.

Stewards carry connections with others into the arena of Public Work, where they co-create things of lasting civic significance. Distinctive practices in this arena include efforts to expand aspirations, change the prevailing story, commit to multisolving, bridge timescales, and align investments.

Through it all, Human and Civic Development shine through as stewards learn and adapt in a constantly changing world. Unlike citizenship by birth—which is conferred automatically and held passively—stewardship is an active practice to be deepened over time. Stewards are not born; they grow. They develop the inner conscience, humility, and civic identity that allow them to turn toward complexity rather than away from it, and to sustain commitment across the long arc of change. Other practices in this arena include efforts to promote abundance, habituate action learning, consider legacies past and future, and use data to chart progress.

Taken together, these specific practices shed light on the routine things that make democracy possible in the first place: it is not enough to inherit a democracy—each of us must choose to practice it as a valued way of life. The next section features three stories of stewards in action in Florida, Delaware, and Washington State.

II. Case Examples of Stewards in Action

Case 1 (Connecting Across Differences): BeWell Palm Beach County

The practices of weaving vested interests, valuing unheard voices, earning trust, strengthening interdependence, and building shared power are unmistakable in the story of [BeWell Palm Beach County](#) (BeWell PBC), a multisector collaborative formed after the nearby Parkland school shooting to advance behavioral health and wellness in one of Florida's most diverse—and unequal—counties. Who is BeWell PBC? Their [2021 Impact Report](#) says, "In a word, everyone." Hospital systems, school districts, faith communities, government agencies, and resident leaders—people with lived experience of behavioral health challenges alongside credentialed professionals—share power at every table. As BeWell PBC demonstrates, those struggling most are often the most perceptive about what needs to change.

At the core of these community connections are [five simple rules for building belonging and civic muscle](#)—guiding principles that have become the foundation of BeWell PBC's work across all its initiatives. They represent the kind of simple, memorable guidance that allows a diverse coalition to maintain coherence across hundreds of decisions without heavy bureaucratic coordination. They have been adopted and enacted by system leaders and employees, written into county government strategic plans, and shared with Palm Beach County Commissioners—a remarkable journey from grassroots principles to institutional norms:

- ***Listen***: Honor the community's voice before you plan and do the work.
- ***Share***: Reach out to everyone, especially those who are isolated and alone.
- ***Innovate***: Cut the red tape and focus on things that keep people healthy and out of trouble.
- ***Connect***: Rely on relationships to build power. Don't go it alone.
- ***Commit***: Acknowledge power dynamics and commit to partnering with community to dismantle racism.

The Be Well Do Well neighborhood [mini-grant program](#) demonstrates these rules in tangible form. In 2020–21, 105 applicants competed for 13 grants totaling \$50,000 to residents, nonprofits, faith communities, and schools. Grantees addressed senior isolation through technology training, created safe spaces for African American men to process trauma, and built peer support for underserved Hispanic/Latina women. In 2022, 14 awardees reached diverse communities across the county. BeWell PBC hired Deon C. Jefferson, a 2020 mini-grant awardee, as grants navigator, creating a living example of stewardship building more stewardship.

"We see the signs of civic muscle and belonging in every one of the mini-grants awarded."

—BeWell PBC 2021 Impact Report

More recently, BeWell PBC has deepened its commitment to generational change. Their Culture of Wellness Team expanded to include 60 community and systems leaders—from resident groups and grassroots initiatives to behavioral health providers, government agencies, and the school district—in simulation activities that challenged participants to identify system challenges and plan for a thriving community. A smaller cohort then participated in a Stewardship Investor Learning Lab to explore what it takes to reorient resources from over-relying on urgent services toward expanding vital conditions. The relationships formed were so profound that BeWell PBC invited all participants to join its Stewardship Council.

The generational aspiration was also made concrete through a first-of-its-kind [Behavioral Health Technician Program](#), first developed by BeWell PBC and the county school district and eventually approved statewide. The program enables high school juniors and seniors to earn a behavioral health certification and enter the workforce immediately after graduation. It is estimated to benefit up to 6,000 students across 20 medical academy programs. As Networks Manager Alita Faber put it: "This program is the starting point for communities to develop their own professionals for generations to come." BeWell PBC's work demonstrates that shared power, when sustained over time, does not merely address today's needs—it plants seeds for a different future to take root.

Case 2 (Creating Transformative Opportunities): Healthy Communities Delaware

The practices of expanding aspirations, committing to multisolving, and aligning investments are most visible in the story of [Healthy Communities Delaware](#) (HCD), a statewide network advancing health, well-being, and equity through the [vital conditions](#) framework. [Dora Williams](#) of the Route 9 Community Development Corporation walks twelve miles along the Route 9 corridor south of Wilmington, knocking on every door to share resources for substance use recovery—and expanding every conversation to housing, financial security, and environmental health simultaneously. This is [multisolving](#) in its most elemental form: choosing approaches that advance multiple goals at once.

Delaware's commitment to creating transformative opportunities found consequential institutional expression in the development of six multisolvers within the [State Health Improvement Plan](#)—cross-cutting strategies addressing multiple vital conditions while simultaneously addressing priority outcomes identified in its [2023 State Health Assessment](#) (SHA). This is a rare achievement: translating the strategic priorities of community stewards into official state policy, with the vital conditions framework adopted not merely by grassroots groups but by the state itself. Their [investment story](#) is equally striking: HCD invested \$9.5 million in communities through its Community Collaborations Fund, distributed \$4.2 million on behalf of the Division of Public Health, and supported \$1.3 million in capacity and field building—with those investments leveraging an additional \$20 million obtained with six collaborative investors. Annual investment grew from \$530,957 in 2020 to nearly \$2.3 million in 2025, reaching 18 communities, 23 partner organizations, and more than 188,000 residents—nearly 20 percent of Delaware's population.

"Funding is pledged over the long-term and that is very important as true community revitalization is a long and often grueling process."

—Patricia Kelleher, NeighborGood Partners

Delaware's stewards have also worked to change the prevailing story of their future—cultivating narratives of hope, shared humanity, and mutual strength that shift expectations about what is possible. As one steward observed about HCD in a national dialogue: "Language is sticking around thriving together; the vital conditions framework has expanded beyond the organization we initially worked with...the state is owning it." When language and aspiration travel from a pilot collaborative to statewide policy—when residents and system leaders share not just programs but a moral vision of all people thriving together—the story of what is possible expands dramatically. That is the essence of stewardship's transformative potential: it does not merely solve problems one at a time. It reshapes the terms on which aspirations and assets come together.

Case 3 (Learning and Adapting): North Sound Accountable Community of Health

The practices of embracing complexity, habituating action learning, considering legacies past and future, and using data to chart progress are powerfully illustrated by [North Sound Accountable Community of Health](#) (ACH) in Washington State, a regional collaborative formed in 2014 by stewards spanning five counties and eight tribal nations. That founding partnership is not incidental; it is foundational. The region's multicultural legacies—drawing on the wisdom, histories, and governance traditions of the Coast Salish and other Indigenous peoples—have shaped a distinctive approach to stewardship that takes seriously the obligation to honor Indigenous knowledge in shaping a thriving future.

This commitment is visible throughout North Sound's work, such as the Coast Salish Youth Coalition and the Northwestern Washington Indian Health Board's commitment to supporting Indigenous lifegivers. The ACH's virtual [Learning Series](#)—attended by 80 percent of network partners—features tribal experts alongside regional specialists on topics ranging from birth equity to art as a tool for self-care and activism, with sessions archived in a [North Sound Resource Library](#) so Indigenous wisdom, like all collective learning, is preserved across time. A [Youth Learning Institute](#) in 2024 brought together young people (aged 16 to 24) to explore their potential futures—with guest speakers and activities drawn from the lived experiences of young people across the region's many cultures.

"If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected—those, precisely, who need the law's protection most!—and listens to their testimony."

—James Baldwin, cited in North Sound ACH 2024 Impact Report

Board Chair Kevin Riley invoked James Baldwin in his [2024 letter](#) because it captures North Sound's foundational orientation: shared stewardship begins by going to the unprotected and

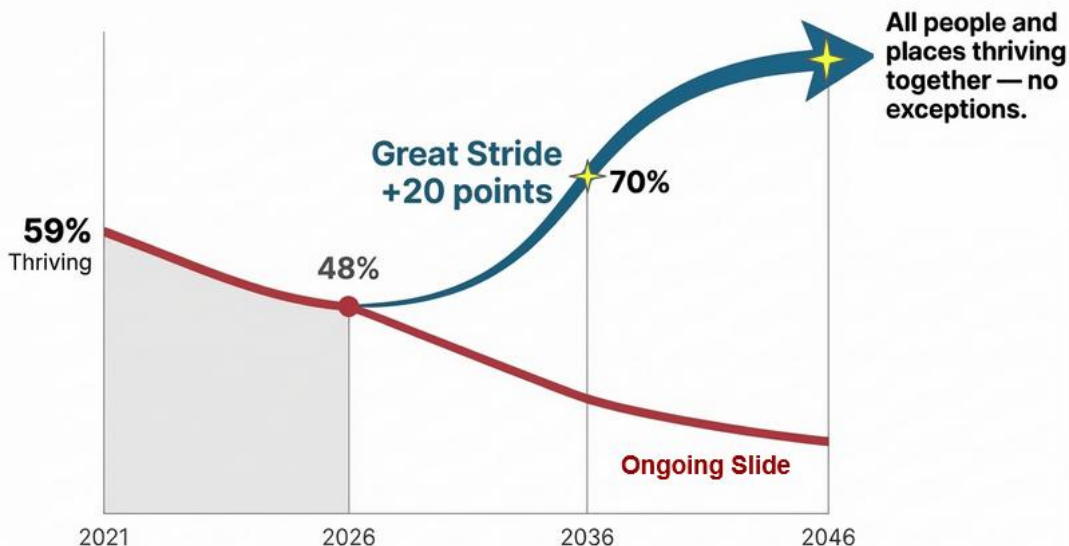
listening. That orientation requires a practice of action learning—building continuous shared learning into the structure of the collaborative rather than treating it as an occasional obligation done for others. The [Collaborative Action Network](#)—which grew to 222 organizations in 2024 through word of mouth and member references—creates the connective tissue for this learning. "At the biannual winter convening," one partner noted, "we were able to form relationships with neighboring county groups in the Network that remain strong today." In 2024, North Sound's Measuring Well-Being Community of Practice developed the region's first [Well-Being Survey](#), designed to harmonize qualitative and quantitative data through an equity lens that honors "the view of multiple cultures and identities." When measurement solidifies everyone's sense of belonging and civic muscle—rather than being imposed from outside—it becomes a powerful way to simultaneously establish vital conditions and strengthen shared stewardship for even more challenging work.

III. A Great Stride: Courageous Citizenship and the Maturity of a Rising Movement

The Commitment

Across the country, a growing number of stewards are making a bold, measurable commitment: a 20-point increase in the share of people thriving within a decade (Fig 3). We refer to this as a "[Great Stride](#)"—ambitious enough to require transformation, specific enough to focus effort, meaningful enough to inspire concerted action. The commitment is grounded in Gallup's [life evaluation index](#): a 20-point shift would represent genuine transformation in the fabric of community life, not marginal improvement. It is the difference between a world in which a majority of people in America are struggling and suffering (currently 48% of US adults) versus one where the vast majority are thriving. The scale of tangled threats facing American communities—including economic insecurity, environmental catastrophe, structural racism, disinformation, and fraying civic institutions—is real and urgent. However, there is no better time to escape the doom loop and make a great stride toward a better future.

Figure 3: A Great Stride Toward Thriving Together



History shows that transformative change is possible—but only when people make specific, publicly accountable commitments to move beyond the status quo. The abolition of slavery, the Civil Rights Act, the creation of Social Security, and the expansion of voting rights all required generations of stewards to hold fast to an audacious north star in the face of fierce resistance and repeated setbacks. What made those endeavors effective was not the absence of obstacles, but the depth of commitment to a humane, morally compelling future. As stewards at PolicyLink affirm in their "[We Are the Founders](#)" vision: "It is now the work of our generation to take up the unfulfilled promise of 'We, the People' and refound a country that truly serves all." Democracy's promise has always exceeded its contemporary practice; changemakers in every generation have helped close that gap by insisting, with courage and clarity, that those ideals must include everyone—no exceptions. As Valerie Bunce observed, citizens in a democracy must conjure the courage to [accept uncertainty of results for certainty in processes](#). They must build the will to share power even when "your side" does not always prevail because unwavering [solidarity](#), knowing that no one will be left behind, is the greater prize. As the authors of [Freedom's Revival](#) argue, building a world worthy of our descendants requires stepping into uncertainty rather than seeking comfort in false security.

From Vending Machine to Barn Raising

At the heart of the Great Stride commitment lies a fundamental question about the relationship between government and citizens. Frank Benest captured it in a pair of metaphors: [vending machine versus barn raising](#). In the vending machine model, citizens pay taxes and expect services in return. This positions people as individual consumers who care only about services they personally receive—it is, at root, a deficit model, assuming something is missing in people that government must fix. Even excellent customer service leaves a "fundamental problem," Benest argues: it turns citizens into consumers and "undermines people's confidence in and their allegiance to government."

The barn raising metaphor suggests something different. In rural communities, no single family can raise a barn alone—so neighbors gather, each contributing what they can. Someone hammers; another holds the ladder; someone brings food. The barn goes up through concerted effort oriented toward a shared goal. People do not ask "Why doesn't someone do this for us?" They ask, "What can we build together?"

The shift in mindset from vending machine to barn raising captures the essence of shared stewardship as a civic practice. Workers in government agencies become fellow stewards rather than the sole source of power and authority. Residents also become fellow stewards of their communities rather than claimants to a distant bureaucracy. The case examples in Section II are each stories of modern barn raising—ambitious civic ventures animated by shared values.

Belonging and Civic Muscle as a Multisolver

What makes each of these barn-raising ventures possible—and what distinguishes them from the vending machine—is something that cannot be delivered by any program or mandated by any policy. It must be grown, relationship by relationship, across lines of difference and through the persistent efforts to earn trust. That something is the heart of the [vital conditions](#) framework: [belonging and civic muscle](#) (Fig 4).

Figure 4: Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being



Belonging and civic muscle is both a vital condition and a practical capacity necessary for equitable success in every other kind of [work](#). It is a reliable multisolver: when strengthened, it advances multiple vital conditions at once, creating a [virtuous cycle](#) in which people who feel they belong develop more civic muscle and become more capable of co-creating the conditions that draw in even more.

Belonging and civic muscle is the connective tissue among the barn raisers themselves. In each community described above, this vital condition was not an ancillary benefit of the "real work"—it was a precondition for any meaningful work to be done. When people co-author their community's future, multisolving priorities rise to the top and become more likely to [stick](#). When stewards draw on living legacies of mutual learning and shared governance, they deepen their capacity for even more challenging work over time. That is why belonging and civic muscle is central in the vital conditions framework—not as a metaphor, but as a mechanism.

What Does Courageous Citizenship Look Like?

Courageous citizenship is rarely about individual acts of heroism. It is mostly sustained, relational, and often unglamorous acts of working together as unique people in a common world—across color, class, gender, and other human differences; across institutional boundaries; and across generations. The Braver Angels frameworks parse civic life into three common styles that complement each other and could become expected parts of daily life, not episodic or exotic.

The stories in this paper reveal glimpses of civic courage in the lives of [everyday stewards](#). Dora Williams walking 12 miles to knock on every door along Route 9 is courageous citizenship. BeWell PBC elevating the voices of residents who historically had no say in the systems that shape their lives is courageous citizenship. North Sound ACH investing in deep multicultural learning and tribal partnership—even when institutional incentives push toward transactional care—is courageous citizenship. None are glamorous, but all move us, slowly and surely, closer to an equitable, thriving future.

A [movement to thrive together](#) – animated by savvy stewards – is real and rising across America. It is mostly invisible because mainstream media and disaster entrepreneurs divert our attention to chaos and conflict, not to the [green shoots of civic renewal](#) in communities from Palm Beach to Puget Sound. Those who are committed to help make great strides are not utopian dreamers; they are principled changemakers who know that a 20-point shift is achievable if enough of us see a thriving future and believe we can navigate there. Their commitment is a public declaration of intent, an acceptance of mutual accountability, and a signal to others that this work is worth joining. They are part of a proud tradition of [American pragmatism](#) that refuses to accept the gap between democracy's promise and its imperfect presence.

The path ahead calls for qualities that stewards already exhibit in communities across the country—even though most are [unsung](#): ambition and humility in equal measure; curiosity about experiences and futures not yet seen; skill in spotting patterns across scales of action; and relentless effort to pursue new paths, ignite latent energy, and defuse the inevitable barriers of burnout, backlash, and disbelief. Imagine, a decade from now, celebrating a 20-point rise in people and places thriving together. That achievement—propelled by the surge of belonging and civic muscle and democratic renewal it would entail—could be our greatest gift to future generations. It calls for millions of ordinary people to find the sparks of [spirited stewardship](#) in themselves and others. As this movement matures, it cultivates exactly the qualities that Braver Angels envisions: capacities to connect across differences rather than retreat into enclaves; commitments to create common goods through public work rather than winner-take-all competition; as well as human and civic development that allows people to hold uncertainty, engage complexity, and sustain hope across the long arc of democratic renewal. Shared stewardship is not an alternative to democracy nor a small subset of it. It is democracy in its most active, generative, and fully human form.

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