

Subject: Choosing Common Sense

Date: 9/26/12

We have choices in life. This letter asks you to make one.

I'm writing to all Arizonans because I think it is time we choose. Not Obama and not Romney, but Arizona and Arizona's children.

If writing a letter to all of Arizona seems pretty presumptuous to you, I'm right there with you. I wrote most of this in February, called some good friends and asked them to read, comment, and promise not to forward. They did. And then, I procrastinated.

A few weeks ago, I was encouraged by several to follow through. And this is the result of a choice to put this call for common sense in your hands.

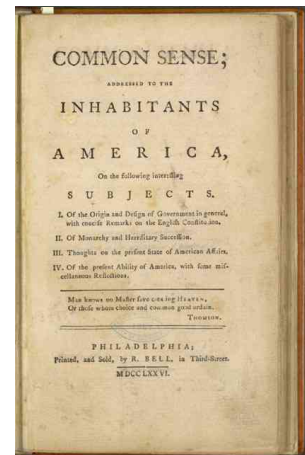
I know nowadays that most people don't read things more than a page long - everything is 30 second sound bites and "tweets". In this too long email, I've poured out my truth, from the heart, because I think it's time to be bigger than ourselves and reclaim our communities, schools, and government. I hope when you get to the end, like a good book, you'll feel like it was worth your time and energy. (BTW, it'll take you less time to read than watching one inning of a D'Backs game and it could be more fun.)

I'm frustrated, big time, by our legislature and political leaders. Our state is headed in the wrong direction and most everyone I know agrees that is so. I've shared some of my frustrations and then offered up a way for common sense to be recognized. I hope you'll join me. I know you have your own frustrations and the action I suggest we all take is intended to provide thousands of us the opportunity to offer solutions to Arizona's challenges with some heavy doses of common sense.

So, here we go.

In short, while we have some true statesmen, too many of Arizona's legislators and elected leaders take actions that result in legislation that is silly, self-serving, ill-considered, and, at times, borders on being corrupt. Too few possess common sense, the courage to lead, or are focused on the will of Arizona's people as their top priority. A man whose business is getting people elected in the state once told me that, "our politicians generally are all nice people to start with and then when they get to the Capitol, they pump all the oxygen out of the room." For some reason, once elected, our "leaders" become partisan politicians and common sense suddenly becomes uncommon.

There are many, many thousands of Arizonans who feel similarly frustrated. Over the last few years, I've heard much of that frustration, felt it, and seen it in initiatives and petitions. I think it's time we come together and make our voices heard for the good of the common people who makeup what ought to be a wonderful Arizona.



For perspective, I'm a Viet Nam vet, was a long-time Republican (I just recently registered Independent), and am close to retirement at my Beatle age of 64. I've been a teacher, coach, principal, and school superintendent, as well as a business owner - all in Arizona over the last 40 years, but it's only recently that I've gotten more forward in advocating for some common sense across our state.

A few years ago, I wrote another too long email calling for Respect for Regular Folks that made the rounds a bit and led to about 2,000 of us addressing the legislature's desire to drastically cut education funding in 2009. About a year later, I made a fairly naïve and quickly aborted run to be state school superintendent. But I learned.

The most discouraging thing I learned is that the folks that control the Republican Party in Arizona not only don't support public education, if they had their way, there would be no public education. Zilch, nada, none. This is reflected nationally in the 2012 Republican Party Platform calling for the elimination of the Department of Education.

In my world growing up in Sierra Vista, America was the land of opportunity. It didn't matter how poor you were (I was) or where you are born, you could succeed. And, education - whether college, trade, vocational, or just a good high school experience—was the key that opened the door to success. But in the last few years, that story is slipping away; and that story, I believe, is foundational to America's and Arizona's success.

My Arizona is one where we pull together on big challenges across political, religious, or other differences. I don't believe in big government and am financially conservative -- but I believe in common sense more than anything else. I think most people are pretty reasonable and pretty smart. In my Arizona, compromise is not a sin, moderation not evil, and shared communication a necessity. Our politics have become so hateful, divisive, and unproductive. We have to be able to do better than this, don't we? I think it's time we insist.

I was born in West Virginia, so I like to joke that perhaps I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer. But, I do have strong foundational values and I know when they're being violated; as do you. I simply can no longer see how our children, families, and communities are a priority in our politics. **What civilization is great that does not make its children a priority? Presently, Arizona does not.**

The well-being of our children and their education is the driver of economic opportunity and innovation. It is also the heartbeat of our communities - the place where we not only gain skills and knowledge but also about what makes us different and connects us. Our legislators and leaders don't seem to get it, don't care, or are so heavily corrupted by high concentrations of money and power that they no longer reflect a government that is of, by, and for the people.

So, I come back to **Choices**. We really can make a **Choice** and insist on some common sense. The greatest waterfall in the world starts with a single drop of water. You are the single drop. Each of us are one single drop. **Together we can change the story of Arizona and show how, when folks with common sense pull together, anything is possible.**

Arizona is a mess. You know it. I know it. Our friends and neighbors know it. Polls say so. We're headed in the wrong direction. We are much like America on the whole, only worse.

I don't love Starbucks, but their CEO Howard Schultz got it right in his full page ad in the July 1st edition of the Wall Street Journal

"...in our nation's capital, our elected leaders...put ideology over real solutions. I love America, but we all know something is wrong. The deficits this country must reconcile are much more than financial, and our inability to solve our own problems is sapping our national spirit. We are better than this. America's history has shown that we have accomplished extraordinary things when we act collectively, with courage, creativity, and generosity of spirit-especially during trying times.....Let's tell our government leaders to put partisanship aside and to speak truthfully about the challenges we face....as citizens, let's all get more involved. Please, don't be a bystander. Understand we have a shared responsibility in solving our nation's problems. We can't wait for Washington."

I can't say it much better. What Mr. Schultz calls for in Washington is the same remedy we need in Arizona.

I have five insights to share about America, Arizona, education, and our politics.

Insight 1: The vanishing middle class

Insight 2: Losing connection in a connected world

Insight 3: Priority One in a common sense world

Insight 4: Our legislature is broken: An example

Insight 5: Public school criticism and the business model

The vanishing middle class

Raised by two working parents in the late 40's and early 50's with a favorite meal of bread and brown gravy, I had no idea that was all my parents could afford until they shared that little pearl with me after I turned 20. Maybe that accounts for my fairly simple way of thinking about economics. To me, the perfect illustration of a happy and robust America looks just like the Pillsbury Doughboy. A small number of rich, a huge middle class, and a small number of poor (please note, the Doughboy has tiny feet).

From a wealth perspective, today's America doesn't look at all like the Doughboy. Unfortunately, to accurately imagine how wealth is distributed in America you need to picture the Space Needle in Seattle.

In October, 2010, Bruce Watson of Daily Finance quoted his colleague, Charles Hugh Smith, as noting that *“the top 20% of the American populace holds roughly 93% of the country’s financial wealth, and the top 1% of the country holds 43% of the money in the US. Meanwhile, the group from 40-80% holds a mere 6% of the country’s total assets. While disturbing, even this minuscule share of the wealth pie dwarfs the bottom 40% of the country, who control less than 1% of the wealth.”*

In short, 80% of America’s population has only 7% of the wealth.

Heck, I’ve worked my rear off all my life to become an upper-middle class guy and now I feel worse than I did before I started writing this. Isn’t it shocking that 80% of our population holds only 7% of our country’s wealth?

In my mind, America was, and is, at its best when our middle class is large and employable; I think most agree with that thought. However, our middle class, as we have known it, hasn’t just decreased, it’s dropping like a rock. Vanishing.

When the middle class decreases, the costs of welfare increase, prison populations increase, emergency room visits increase, violence increases, incidence of abuse of all kinds increases, the need for social services increase, social security contributions decrease, confidence in our way of life decreases, and our economy falters.

The United States has quickly become a country of haves and have-nots; even if few of our politicians from either major party want to talk with us directly about it or say it that way. (Note: I wrote this in February, middle class is now discussed daily.)

It doesn’t seem logical that we can continue for long in this way. The only answer, one our forefathers clearly understood, is to educate our way to a large middle class. We can do that, but to do so different **Choices** must be made.

Losing connection in a connected world

One of my grandma’s favorite statements was “If you always tell the truth, you never have to remember what you said.” Admittedly, I wasn’t a quick learner but after a number of “switchings” with a willow branch, I began to see the light.

I tell kids, classes of kids at promotion and graduation, regularly, that the most important thing they can do is to always, always, always tell the truth, the whole truth, the forthright truth. If you know you lie, you can’t trust yourself. If you can’t trust yourself, you can never develop true confidence. Without earned confidence, life becomes much tougher than it should be.

Politics of today has little to do with truth, but lots to do with “spin” and manipulation of half-truths. Regularly, many people who have earned positions of authority bend the truth and lie out-right to defend their positions. The results are no different in business, or government, than they are in personal relationships. You might get away with it for a while, but in the end, lies catch up to you.

A decade ago, maybe two, news made on the east coast never made it to us, unless it was big, and then we got it the next day. In today's connected world, we can know, in seconds, what happens anywhere on our planet. Within communities, the detail of what is passed on, whether fact or not, changes personal behavior virtually instantly.

Oh, there are lots of shrill voices, opinions abound, everyone has one, and the higher their political office or the thicker their wallet, the more we hear about their perspective. In today's world, the pace is fast, a crisis on every news channel each hour, and if there isn't really a crisis, one is made up.

In much of America, the advantage of world-wide connectedness has come with a price - the loss of a sense of community.

The net effect, perhaps inevitably, but certainly unfortunately, is that as a society, we have lost trust in each other and many of our American institutions.

In Arizona, the loss of trust and frustration is evident. While 71% of our eligible voting population is registered, only 54% of them vote. That means less than 39% of people who could vote actually do.

Why?

I think many folks have just given up on their citizenship (taking an active role in democracy) because they just can't see how it matters. As in, it makes no difference what I think anyway, so why should I vote. Maybe that's a quiet way of saying, "I no longer trust the system".

When we campaign and legislate as we have, tearing each other down, making false statements, party before people, losing trust is a given.

Great leadership means leading to a common vision, communicating that vision so that all understand, earning trust daily, having personal regard for all, and staying forever positive; so says Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus in *Strategies for Taking Charge*. We need to establish a Vision for Arizona that would guide our elected leaders. A Vision grounded in common sense and common cause. Arizona is bigger than the Republican Party, bigger than the Democratic Party. It is not the Party who wins that should be most important, but rather the overall well-being of our citizenry.

I believe Arizonans want civil discourse to disagree agreeably and use common sense to find common cause and agree to a common vision. Wouldn't that be a welcome change and a great **Choice?**

Priority One in a common sense world

There is a great need, really a nation-saving need, to reestablish a strong, deep, well-educated middle class. To accomplish that, as many, many have written, we need for virtually all our kids to leave school confident, technologically proficient, able to think

critically, analyze, and problem solve, respect others differences, possessing the traits of initiative, reliability, citizenship, and the ability to be socially comfortable with others. **Let's call that Priority One.**

If we are to accomplish Priority One, we must focus like we did when we wanted to get a man on the moon before the Soviets. I still remember standing in a group and cheering as Neil Armstrong, who recently passed away, famously stated "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." I was proud, America was proud. Reestablishing a vibrant middle class, will insure America's long-term success and make us all proud once again.

To succeed, we need first-rate leaders who are kid-centered, dynamic, entrepreneurial, and "get it".

Next, we need great teachers; that means teachers who possess excellent content knowledge, great teaching technique, the ability to differentiate their instruction so that each child is taught at a challenging level, and, finally, and most importantly, the ability to "connect" with kids. Unlike the perception, in most districts the average teacher busts their rear every day. The good news is, if led well, the vast majority of our teachers have the talent, dedication, and commitment to kids to get it done.

Thirdly, kids CANNOT be allowed to fall between the cracks. Virtually all kids, regardless of background, will choose to succeed if they work with a teacher that CONNECTS with them personally.

The ability to CONNECT comes at a price. I love technology but the chances of making "connection" with an at-risk kid over the Internet are slim to none. When a kid has started to fall through the cracks, he stops falling and starts climbing up the ladder to success when a teacher CONNECTS with him, eyeball to eyeball and heart to heart, in a small group, at the appropriate educational level four times a day.

Today's Arizona legislator will say, "We can't possibly fund that." And I say, "You can't afford not to."

Quality education for all is a necessity if Arizona is to become the state we deserve. Necessity means priority. Arizona should fund its priorities; they call that a **Choice**.

Our legislature is broken: An example

Over a year ago, the Arizona Republic published an expose on Student Tuition Organizations. Originally, the purpose of STOs was to provide money for tuition to private schools to poor and under-served students through tax deductible donations. The STOs were allowed to keep 10% of the money for their services. The expose illustrated that in many cases, a well-to-do parent of one private schooled child would give their money in the name of a friend whose child attended a private school. In turn, that parent would donate in favor of his friend's child. Also, some STOs just allowed people to donate in favor of a designated child.

After a week's worth of headlines, a committee was appointed to look into the situation. After a short time, the committee made some changes that disallowed the specific practices noted above, but left plenty of room for things to continue virtually as they were. In 2010-11, the combined taxpayer and corporate tax credits exceeded \$43,000,000.

The net effect, some poor and under-served do now attend private school, and lots of well-to-do and rich parents manage to get most of their child's private school tuition paid through tax credit donations from others. I don't blame people for doing that, the loophole is there and it's legal. However, once the loophole was pointed out, legislators didn't close it; they didn't want to close it.

Why?

Most rich and well-to-do people, whose children attend private school, vote, enjoy that benefit and wish to keep the privilege. So, the legislature put a new face on the problem, but left the loopholes.

If you run an STO, you get to keep 10% of the donations for your efforts in running the business. So, say for example, that you are influential, have many well-to-do friends, you are a lawyer, and also happen to be a legislator, and you get folks and corporations to make tax deductible donations to the tune of \$8,000,000, that leaves you \$800,000 minus the expenses of giving the money away. That would leave a nice tidy little profit even if you were a poor business man. Oh, and this year, that same legislator sponsored a bill to double the tax credit donation limit for private school tuition for individuals and corporations. The bill also reversed most of the restrictions that were placed on the STOs after the expose.

To no one's surprise, the bill passed quickly, through both Arizona's House and Senate, and the governor quickly signed it into law.

So, our lawyer legislator now gets to accept more donations from wealthy parents so their kids can go to private school free or at least at a much reduced cost. And, as the eligible tax credit amount was doubled, we can only guess what his profit may be now.

A number of months ago, The Arizona Republic printed an editorial about this situation titled, "Senators Conflict of Interest Astounds." A quote from that editorial: "There is no act of lawmaking at the state Capitol that is more self-serving than (Senator Steve, District 21) Yarbrough's cushy arrangement with his legislating cronies. But they remain utterly deaf to criticism."

This legislation, SB 1047, passed quickly along party lines with only Russ Jones, R-Yuma, who lost in the August 28 primary, voting in opposition on the Republican side. This vividly illustrates the self-serving, greedy nature of many legislators, the favoritism shown the wealthy and the connected, and the disregard for the needs of our under-served children.

Effective leaders do the right thing; they stand up to be counted when the going gets tough. You don't pass laws just because you can; you pass them only for great purpose,

for common cause and with common sense. Is there any doubt our legislature is broken?

Public school criticism and the business model

Since publication of **A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform** in 1983, public education has been the universal whipping boy for a multitude of society's ills. Certainly, much of that criticism was earned and while reform has been a constant for the past 29 years, much is yet to be accomplished.

During that time, astute businessmen, seeing the large amounts of money being spent on public education, seized the opportunity, sensing they could get a piece of the action. The numbers of business people wishing to see public dollars shifted to the private sector have increased exponentially over the years.

Not coincidentally, public schools and teachers have been under tremendous criticism, and as Clayton Christensen made clear in [Disrupting Class](#), that happens at times of significant economic, technological, and social change. But in utilizing well-researched and documented studies, he points out that, "*schools have actually been improving*," and then more surprisingly that, "*public schools have been required to do the equivalent of rebuilding an airplane in mid-flight...something almost no private enterprise has been able to do.*"

In Arizona, virtually every politician says they support public schools when campaigning, but once in office very, very few vote that way. The reasons for not supporting public education may vary, but for many reasons, the present majority of Arizona's legislators believe a business model for education is in the state's best interest.

If we are to establish the broad and well-educated middle class needed for our state, really our nation, to expect a vibrant economic future, our legislators must focus on facts, not hyperbole; the well-being of all our people, not focused on the privileged. **Our legislators must understand that when one desires profit, part of the formula is controlling costs. When school is a business in search of profit, cost control demands little interest in those most expensive to instruct.**

Priority One means we have to become successful with the children who live with all the social problems we know exist; poverty, drugs, alcoholism, and abuse of all kinds.

Really good investors know that if you take short-term profit, sometimes you can lose out on huge long-term gain. (Can you say Apple?) If we are to have Priority One gains that ensure Arizona's long term success in building a vibrant middle class, we have to invest in schools that teach all kids, especially those who come to us with great disadvantages through no fault of their own.

That, my friends, is common sense, and would be a most wise Choice.

A Call to Common Sense

Our legislators say they care about kids, their actions show they do not. Our legislators say they care about education, their actions show they do not. Our legislators say they are planning for the future, their actions say they do not understand what is necessary to make the future viable.

Now is the time for regular folks uniting behind a banner of common sense to reclaim the dreams and democracy we believed in as children. It is not going to be easy. It will take time, inconvenience, a little less sleep, patience, courage, and listening to each other in the context of civil discourse. But we can change the story. It is a **Choice**. A real choice.

First Steps-Time to Deliver a Message

A message must be delivered that current legislators, political parties, and lobbyists understand. They understand something is changing when masses of people gather and when they fear being voted out of office.

There are few things more beautiful and powerful than an Arizona Waterfall. Created when individual drops of water flow together, waterfalls shape the world. It is time each of us, like a drop of water, creates an Arizona Waterfall, and chooses to stand for common sense.

So, Step 1: Go to [Arizona Waterfall](#). You'll find the link to RSVP for a rally on Meetup.com as well as links to connect with this effort on Facebook and Twitter. Please register, provide input on meetup.com, and promise, when provided notification via email, to peacefully (but loudly) march and rally. When the counter shows 50,000 of us are registered, then the event will be organized. When the counter hits 100,000 people, the date will be set and two weeks later, Arizona's elected leaders will get a new understanding of what Arizonans can do when we make a choice to come together. We'll ask that folks bring their thinking caps and everyone who has one - their phone. This rally will not be typical; not an endless line up of speakers talking and you just passively listening or chanting. The focus will be placed on your creative participation, using technology and small group discussion on the issues you have already brought to the website and brainstormed for the creation of a common Vision. You will vote with your phones (or a neighbors if you don't have one) and see the results. If the Waterfall develops before the election in November, you'll have the opportunity to express your preference for which candidates you believe will best represent our adopted Vision. Please understand, I am aware of the magnitude of this undertaking and the help needed to do it right. Rest assured, we will do it right, but we will only do it if there are 100,000 of us committed, not 25K, or 50K, or even 75K. If we are to be a waterfall, we must be a magnificent one.

Step 2: Lead. Every participant will have opportunity for input, specific and philosophical, which will be collected after you register with input presented at the rally. Great communication is needed to do that. So, when you register on meetup.com you

can designate whether or not you wish to serve as a leader. There are; (1) Base Leaders who communicate with 20 rally registrants; (2) Team Leaders who communicate with 10 base leaders impacting 200 rally registrants; (3) Group Leaders who communicate with 10 team leaders impacting 2,000 rally registrants; (4) Section Leaders who communicate with 10 group leaders impacting 20,000 rally registrants; and (5) Division Leaders who communicate with 10 section leaders impacting potentially 200,000 rally registrants.

Step 3: Share this email, with your own personal note, with your family, neighbors, and friends on paper, by email, facebook, twitter, by horseback, or pigeon.

Step 4: Volunteer, by signing up on website, two hours a week to help organize the rally, spread the word, and make this real.

Step 5: Just get started by getting more active, by listening, noticing, and talking to others.

There are plenty of powerful ways forward

I totally believe in the unique ability of regular folks to respond to difficult situations once we're engaged. There are tons of good ideas about ways to have things work better in our state -- they are just being discussed over coffee, in break rooms, and across the dinner tables rather than in the legislature.

Share those ideas with folks just like you and those different from you. Together, let's make Arizona a better place to live, work, and go to school. I can imagine Independents, Democrats, Republicans, and all the regular folks who see the common ground between the Tea Partiers and the Occupiers showing up to take action to reclaim Arizona in light of the challenges we face.

If we make that Choice, we can develop a Common Vision; we can elect folks who understand the concept "of the people, by the people, for the people" - folks who truly have Common Sense.

Of course, if we don't wish to make this **Choice**, if we're all just talk and people don't want to see major change, then the Arizona Waterfall will really just be like an afternoon Arizona shower, it'll come and go, and one will hardly notice when it's gone.

However, although 80% of us only have 7% of the wealth, we still have 80% of the vote.

I invite you to make a new **Choice**.

Go to [Arizona Waterfall](#), right now.

Maybe, I'll see you soon. I have faith we can do this.

Thanks for reading. G9

