Why Politics Still Matters

By Jedediah Purdy

We live in a time that values public life very highly, but suspects that public life is dishonorable and unnecessary. I ask you to consider the idea that we need public life, as well.

These two words, *public* and *private*, go back to classical times. *Public* comes from *publius*, the people, which meant the political community. *Republic* comes from *respublica*. That means the public thing, or a government shared among the people. The public arena was the space where people exercised power and made important decisions. Being in public meant having a special dignity, the dignity of power and governance.

Three of the American Founders—James Madison, John Hay, and Alexander Hamilton—wrote under the name Publius during the battle over ratification of the Constitution. By calling themselves Publius, they claimed that they were the voice of the people, which was the only voice that had the right to govern the country.

And *private* was a very different word. It has the same origin as privation and deprivation. A private person was one who was deprived of the dignity of public participation and political power. A private man was a man who was defined by what he lacked, by what he didn't have. He was literally a man deprived.

Today, we have reversed these ideas about the public and the private. Private life seems powerful, exciting, and dignified. The great events of our time happen in private enterprise—children around the world want to be Bill Gates, not George W. Bush … or Bill Clinton. In our own, smaller existences, we find our emotional satisfactions in the private life of family and friends, and put our ambitions into our pri-

vate careers. Whole industries exist just to aid our private pursuit of excellence: personal trainers, interior decorators, plastic surgeons, and all sorts of therapists and counselors.

At the same time as we've developed a heroic idea of private life, we've come to think much less of public life, and especially politics. It has become an impotent exercise, a form of entertainment with low production values. It attracts bad characters and low motivations. It doesn't promise to change much beyond the details of the tax code.

One reason we've gotten this idea of politics is simply the bad behavior of professional politicians. In the last decade, Washington, D.C., has seen a lot of hypocrisy, a lot of personal attacks, and a lot of purely partisan bloodletting.

But there are other reasons for our disaffection from politics that run deeper than the events of the last decade. One is the idea that "politics" means the work that professional politicians do: running for office, fighting over legislation in Congress, trying to advance the interests of your party. This is a narrow idea of politics. Professional politics attracts the worst ambition, even if it also sometimes attracts the best. Maybe more importantly, it doesn't make much room for the rest of us, except as spectators or employees. It's sometimes hard to get inspired by a politics that is just the ritualized warfare of powerful men, and now a few powerful women.

Another idea that makes us disaffected from politics is that the only successful politics is one that, as the phrase goes, "changes the world." This idea comes down to us from the revolutionary tradition, both in the United States and in Europe. That is a tradition where great political upheavals seek to free people from the chains of history, to restore their natural rights and inborn equality.

This is far from being just a Marxist idea; in some ways it is also a Christian idea. The last great expression of revolutionary politics in the United States was the civil rights movement, with its deep religious motivations and boundless ambition to change an unjust social order. In fact, it might be better to call this tradition not revolutionary, but Promethean. Prometheus was the figure from Greek mythology who stole fire from heaven and gave it to men so that they could change their world under their own power.

This is a great tradition, even if it is also a dangerous one. It has been the source of tremendous human betterment and also of terrible violence. But one of its more subtle, almost hidden dangers is that it sets a false standard for most political activity. It suggests that when changing the world is impossible, the people should just give up on politics.

There is a better way of thinking about politics. It's a way that makes space for all of us, and doesn't imagine that changing the world is the only goal of political work.

Saint Augustine defined a political community as one whose members loved something in common. This didn't have to be a high-minded devotion: a band of robbers all love loot, and a community could also be bound together by sensuality, by an appetite for conquest, or by any other of the bad as well as the good things that people love. But if we take this definition of politics—Saint Augustine's definition—it helps us to understand something about our own political practice.

Politics is one way that we decide which of the things that we have in common we will publicly acknowledge, which ones will define us, which ones we will stand up and say that we love. And politics is also how we take care of those things. It is political work to preserve something good. It is political work to prevent the destruction of something we care for.

There is a politics of transformation, which aspires to change the world, but there is also a culture of maintenance, which concerns itself with preserving a world that is constantly endangered, and now more than ever. This politics never has the complete success that Promethean, or revolutionary politics, aims at; its victories are always partial and often invisible: a forest still standing uncut, a river unpolluted, a community still intact, a language preserved, some great transformation completed without destruction.

One difficulty that a politics of maintenance confronts is that, of the human values that have a claim on us, many are in contradiction with each other. They are genuine values, and their claim on us is real; but we cannot achieve them perfectly and all in one place. Environmental conservation and prosperity, or not even prosperity but just the relief of abject poverty, are both imperatives; but sometimes to have one we sacrifice the other. Personal liberty is a genuine good. Its violation is sometimes a crime and always a cause for regret; but security, stability, and equality are also genuine imperatives, and when we sacrifice personal liberty in favor of these, we say that we are making a necessary sacrifice.

These are aspirations and principles that have

some claim on all of us, that contradict each other. When they clash, the choice we make among them defines us as a political community. It says something about who we are, about what we love. In politics, we redefine and redefine what Saint Augustine would have called our political community—our community of people who love something in common.

And one thing I believe is true is that we cannot help loving things in common. In this world there is no good, or beautiful, or healthy thing that does not depend for its existence and preservation on a host of other good, and beautiful, and healthy things. Every one of us, in whatever way we are good, is deeply indebted: to family and friends, to communities and schools, to laws and freedoms, to the people and places that have taught us to be human.

Because no one is born a human being: we learn it the way we might learn a dance or a craft, by participating with those who have, imperfectly but determinedly, mastered it in their own lives. Loving anything well means taking a share in preserving everything that made it possible, that brought it into being and has kept it alive. This indebtedness is our human condition, and politics is one expression of our debt.

In this way, the division between public life and private life is an artificial one. The two weave into each other. Both politicians and parents can act in ways that preserve what we have in common, or in ways that neglect and erode it. They help to pass on the world in better or worse condition than when they found it. The question is not whether we are public or private people, but whether or not we live in a way that respects and adds to our cultural inheritance, our social inheritance, and our ecological inheritance. Politics is one way to address ourselves to this question.

It is human to be divided, both against each other and within ourselves. This is why politics can never be seamless or elegant or altogether inspiring. It is human to act from mixed motives, and for this reason we will always have reason to doubt politicians, and other people, and even ourselves. But it is also human to be deeply indebted, and to love things in common that become the basis of the community we share. We will never be able to get past or give up the politics that speaks to this condition. And we should not wish to.

Jedediah Purdy is an assistant professor of law at Duke University. His most recent book is *Becoming America* (2003). This article is adapted from a commencement address he gave at La Sierra University in June 2001.