



Naked Civics: Strip Away the Politics to Build a Better World

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Strip Away the Politics
to Build a Better World



NATE GARVIS
with GENE REBECK



For my beautiful daughters Ivy and Violet.

*This is a great world that will be made better
by what you will do in it.*

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Introduction

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, I GAVE A speech with the pithy title: *Uncivil Discourse and the Rise of the Outrage Industry*. The premise was that we were living in an environment where we had actually begun to commoditize anger. People were selling it in packaged form, we were buying it by the hours, and it wasn't good for us. At the end, I took some Q & A and a very good friend of mine named Ed Driscoll raised his hand and said exactly this: "Nice speech. So, what?" Honestly ... from a friend! But what he was actually saying, and we had a good laugh about it right then and there by the way, was that now that we're aware of the challenges of living in constant anger, what should we do about it? Well, Ed, it took about a half dozen years, but here's your answer.

A New Design

CriMNet wasn't so much about passing new laws as it was an effort to realign existing efforts, manage information, and link them through technologies and practices similar to those Target uses to track its inventory. It wasn't new thinking in and of itself, but existing thinking applied to a new situation. All Minnesotans owe Charlie, Jane, and Rich a debt of gratitude for the political courage that it took to do something that innovative.

The CriMNet experience also taught me that common-good outcomes aren't the product of laws alone. The common good is a matter of creating a mix of technologies, institutional cooperation, and people who are willing to lead with new ways of thinking about our communities' challenges. Over the years, my work at Target focused more and more on how to create public policy outcomes outside of the venue of a capitol and the production of legislation. Target continued to work on public safety issues, but our focus quickly blossomed into other types of opportunities where we found just by combining the right types of institutions and like-minded partners, our communities could work together much more productively than if we met solely in a legislative setting.

After nearly eighteen years at Target, I left what was a dream job to pursue another dream: a distinctive civic affairs practice. It had always been to my good fortune to be associated with Target, and my good fortune has been augmented greatly by having my corporate family join me along this path: Target remains an important and cherished part of my work. It's a great outfit.

I've spent over twenty-five years at the intersection of big business, government, politics, media, public safety, philanthropy, academia, and non-governmental organizations. In that time, I've made some wonderful friends, and I've learned a lot about a variety of sec-

tors. The people I've met are usually really good people, but too often their results don't honor the good that they intend. And what I've learned most is that the challenges facing our communities are too complex for any one sector to do much on their own. These challenges require the efforts of many contributors focused on those things that we agree upon and the joint actions that move us forward. It takes a community coming together — not by accident, but by design.



The challenges facing our communities are too complex for any one sector to do much on their own.

A New Approach

I believe that it is time to change our thinking. And once we change our thinking, we can change the way we interact and produce designs that, not only serve ourselves individually, but serve the common good, too. In fact, as I'll show you, we've been remarkably successful in doing that in the past. If we can look beyond the distracting political heat, we are actually doing quite a nice job of creating common good outcomes in a number of very important arenas. So many of the ways for creating better outcomes are right at our fingertips. Yes, our politics are angry and it seems as if "our voices" aren't being heard in Congress and our state capitols. But, again, what if I told you that part of the problem lies in where we are focusing our attention?

In this book, you'll learn about **Angertainers and the Outrage Industry** and how and why we're being distracted from focusing on what is truly important. You'll learn about **the Naked Eight**, those community imperatives that we almost *never* argue about. You'll learn about an **entire toolbox** of assets that we have — assets that go beyond the tools of laws and politics. You'll see how we've employed that broad variety of tools by creating **habitat designs** that truly

my practice. So, as you get further into the book, I'll start describing some of my past examples. As you'd imagine, they're not there to show you exactly how you're going to become a designer alongside me, but to demonstrate how I tackled some of these challenges as well as some of the incredible people I've had the pleasure of partnering with.

Let's Get Designing!

This book doesn't purport to have all the answers to all of our societal ills. It's aimed at giving us a perspective, so that we can ask more intelligent questions. Why can't we:

Gather *differently in order to*

Think *differently in order to*

Design *differently in order to*

Buy *differently so we can*

Prosper *together?*

We live in amazing times. Yes, our challenges are great. But we've never had so many different ways to address them. It's time to stop warring over our politics. It's time to strip ourselves down to the essential elements of what we all agree is important and start designing from there. *Naked Civics* isn't just outside-the-box thinking. It's deny-the-box-is-there thinking.





Sudden Illumination Syndrome

YOU KNOW THAT SENSATION WE'VE all experienced these past few years — the one that blinds us with its speed, dishevels our thinking about what we thought we knew, and fills us with daily angst? It's as though the lights had suddenly been flicked on in a dark room. We can see, but we can't focus. I call it Sudden Illumination Syndrome.

Actually, it's been happening for years, as a building tsunami of digital media has engulfed our lives. But in the past few years, Sudden Illumination Syndrome has intensified. Think of it: All that content, those millions and millions of data points — not just from network TV, newspapers, and magazines, but millions upon millions of blogs, websites, tweets, Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube, cable television, and talk radio. All this has become very familiar to us. Yet, paradoxically, it's also strange and confusing. All this illumination, rather

than enlightening us, has thrown us off balance. We're awfully confused right now.

Digital technology has truly brought us into the age of mass multimodal media. Today, it's not just CNN, NBC, FOX, and NPR — we have become part of the media as we tweet, Facebook, Google+, and email each other. And this media is powerful with a capital "P." When you pass something on to someone you know, it oftentimes has more authenticity than you would assign to your local newspaper. And let's face it honestly; too much of our news is nothing more than entertainment dressed up in a news suit. We're awfully cynical right now.

And here's another thing about media these days: Even though we have more access to more information than ever before, mostly we access more information that we already agree with. Combine that self-reinforcing media with decreasing physical interactions with people who think differently from us, and we come up with a heady stew of anonymous anger. It is not only easy to say, "What a stupid idea," but it is comically easy to say, "What an idiot with a stupid idea!" These are things few of us would say to someone face to face — and today we don't have to, except, of course, if you're into those heated protests where people on different sides of an issue seem to enjoy egging each other on, shouting, and jabbing with their fingers. For too many of us, the instant gratification of rage provides a kind of rush or high, a sensation of superiority to a world that we in fact are alienated from. We're awfully coarse right now.

Tied to that is a climate of overreaction that blurs the context and the truth of a situation. For example, Amber Alerts, however useful they may be in some abduction cases, (and indeed there have been wonderful outcomes because of it), have also given many of us a feeling that abductions of children by strangers are more common than they actually are. That feeling turns into action as we plan more and more play dates for our children, instead of letting our kids run

around and explore their world, even as we lament that that kind of freedom was what we enjoyed when “We were their age.” In fact, my friends in law enforcement tell me that the rate of abductions is about where it’s always been for the past fifty years or so, and that in the vast majority of cases, it is an estranged parent who’s responsible for the abduction. It doesn’t matter because our uncritical awareness has convinced us that our kids are in immediate danger. What is rare has begun to seem common in this suddenly-illuminated world of ours. We’re awfully paranoid right now.

Sudden Illumination Syndrome also has exposed us to conspiracy theories that once were considered fringe phenomena. What used to be relegated to the pages of a tabloid is now considered legitimate news: The “birthers” and “truthers” are two of the best known, perhaps too well known. Nearly everyone has a megaphone in the land of Sudden Illumination, and it seems that everyone has his or her volume control knob set to *loud*. We’re awfully suspicious right now.

In short, Sudden Illumination Syndrome may throw out a lot of light, but in this case, the light is generating too much heat, too much anxiety, too much anger, and too much ill will. We feel that not only toward one another, we just don’t have much trust in any institutions whether they are our governments, our businesses, our schools, our hospitals, political parties, religions, or what is called in some circles “traditional” or “mainstream” media.

All this makes it sound as though Sudden Illumination Syndrome is a bad thing, doesn’t it? But in fact, we all know it also has had real benefits. For one thing, if you care to, we now have the ability to easily access more than one or two sources of information — something to which we were limited in a more centralized media age. But we have to take that step outside the gated compounds of our minds if we are to make sense of our new supercharged awareness.

We have to make a shift:

Conte(n)t → Conte(x)t

We have a hyper-abundance of the former, but we need to balance it with much more of the latter. Context is what makes sense of what Sudden Illumination Syndrome has illuminated. Without the deeper connections of context, content is simply entertainment or distraction. Content and distraction are words that reflect the fact that as citizens, we have let ourselves become spectators, cheering on our side and booing the opponents. Too many of us are looking at our communities and our governments — through screens, whether of our televisions, our smartphones, or our laptops.

So here's another shift that we need to make:

Spectator → Actor

Digital media has allowed us to talk like never before. But we aren't putting the same energy into listening. And that means, to me, thinking outside of ourselves and the groups we "identify" with. Simply talking — or shouting! — isn't the same as real interconnection. Put another way: We have lost a sense of civility and the ability to actually deliberate issues. We don't share ideas; instead, we defend our positions and tear the other side down. We don't stop at questioning our opponents' intelligence; it doesn't seem to count unless we question their motives as well.

Even as the problems and challenges we face become larger and more complex, we're finding it harder and harder to come together to face them. And thus, I'll put it out there as such: Our first challenge facing us is *how* we face our challenges. If we don't get better at that, there's not much hope that we'll get much done, either.



We don't stop at questioning our opponents' intelligence; it doesn't seem to count unless we question their motives as well.

That's one of the main points of this book. Sudden Illumination Syndrome has allowed polarization to dominate the way our com-

munities and country function — or is malfunctioning, really. But here's the thing: *It doesn't have to be that way.* I profoundly believe that the vast majority of us don't wish to live in such a toxically-polarized society. Rather than the current environment of cynicism and despair, we could actually live in happier and more prosperous communities and hand off a better world for our children and theirs. This is not merely wishful thinking. It's been my practice, and for quite a few years, it's been my experience. And it can be your experience, too.

If we are to get beyond the destructive fear and distrust that Sudden Illumination Syndrome has engendered, we need to get re-centered, rather than being pulled to the left or right, and we certainly need to get past the idea that “our side” has the market cornered on good ideas, good people, and good intentions.

One other key point I'll be making in *Naked Civics* is: Our current challenges didn't happen by accident. They are a product of our civic *designs*. The word “design” may make most of us think of endeavors like graphics and architecture. But design is really about the creation and use of tools. And as you'll read, what we design aesthetically and digitally is just a part of what we can do as designers. We also can (re)design our communities.

The problem with many of our current civic designs is that they no longer work the way they were originally intended. We certainly can see that in our political system, where perpetuating conflict has become more important than actually making progress on the challenges we must confront.

But here's the great thing: *Anything that has been designed can be redesigned.* Redesigning doesn't always have to be as hard as pushing a law through Congress. But it does mean that more of us will have to get back to the idea of being citizens who are active in building a better community. That's not to say that it will always be easy, but it will probably be easier than you initially imagine. And it will be

fulfilling — certainly more fulfilling than the toxicity that we currently breathe every day.

To be successful in this endeavor, we have to reclaim a great many things. One of them is the word *civics*. It sounds like an old-fashioned term, redolent of long afternoons in a public school classroom, tuning out a teacher droning on about the term lengths of elected officials. Enough of that! I'm taking the word back because it is a rich one. Civics is about how we live together, and how our lives interconnect. And it concerns active involvement and listening, rather than shaking our fists at phones, computer screens, and flat-screen TVs. Civics also requires *civility*, which means taking a deep breath before we react to a news item or Twitter post in order to think out our beliefs — and to see whether we have good reasons to believe them. Civics also requires that rather than cheer, boo, and otherwise grandstand, we actually empathize even with people who we “know” are “wrong.” So, toss out that picture of a boring classroom and replace it with ones that have kids running around your street playing tag, rocking concerts, vibrant downtowns, and lush parks full of greenery and peace, and what it takes to produce it all. That's what the word civics means to me.



Civics is about how we live together, and how our lives interconnect.

And as we shift our definition of that cherished word, I believe that it would serve us well to strip naked — that is, to remove our most cherished prejudices, perceptions, and stereotypes about politics, public policy, and other people and other “groups.”

This will require, among other things, that we become aware of the strengths and limitations of our civic tools. I'll talk more about what I mean by tools later in this book. But for now, here's a useful way to think of them: At their core, tools are the inventions that we

create in the attempt to put some order around our ever-changing world. Our tools have enormous power, and history shows that we're incredibly able to create new ones when we need to. What we need now are redesigned tools.

The toolbox for building the public good includes what you traditionally think of: government, laws, and regulations. We'll always need these — I'm certainly not saying that we can or should do away with government or politics. Quite the contrary. But we do need other tools as well. And one of our main challenges currently is that we're not very used to thinking of anything but government, laws, and regulations when it comes to producing the common good. That's not only a limiting way for us to think, but it puts us squarely back into the angry environment of our current political landscape. Folks, it's not the **only** place to have conversations about how we live and thrive next to each other. Seriously.



Tools are the inventions that we create in the attempt to put some order around our ever-changing world.

One final point: I don't want to suggest that *Naked Civics* is a recipe book for a perfect world. Such a world can never exist. We'll never all think the same way — and despite the polarization that Sudden Illumination Syndrome has caused, that's actually a good thing. Disagreeing is incredibly important. Being disagreeable is another thing, and something that we could stand less of. This book doesn't have all the answers. It's intended to stimulate a conversation about public life — one that leads to different actions. Yes, I hope you'll find what I say is worth listening to. As I mentioned in the introduction, I've worked in a great number of sectors and worked with a great variety of leaders over the past couple dozen years. And here's the thing I've learned over and over: The person who really doesn't care about our communities doing better is extremely rare. Almost

all of us want a fairly similar outcome. But we're just stymied. We all have much more power to make our communities better than we've been led to believe. We'll get to that "led to believe" in a bit. It's an important challenge that we need to address.

So, let's begin the adventure. Let's be civil. Let's listen to each other. Let's learn from each other. Let's start interacting differently. And let's start rebuilding a common-good world where we all can flourish.

As a first step, let's look at one design that has driven us from common ground. I call it the Outrage Industry.

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