

Collaborative Innovation: A Personal Truth

Marilyn Smith

“At this extraordinary time of social, political and economic disintegration, with respect to Collaborative Innovation, what is the most important question we can ask, and why?”

With respect to collaborative innovation, the most important question I ask at this extraordinary time of social, political and economic disintegration is: “WHAT is my personal truth and HOW can I live consistent with my values?”

It’s astounding to see the depth of social, political and economic collapse in front of me. Polite rules of social engagement and protocol are no longer assumed. The pursuit of public service is frequently seen as a farce. The financial institutions that I trusted to provide security have been exposed as deceitful. The premise of respecting people with different values and ideology is challenged daily. The sense of putting country ahead of political party is hazy. People I love are losing their physical vitality. And, my teenage daughter assumes everyone is lying almost all the time. These are examples of the collapse and disintegration I see in front of me.

While the collapse is dramatic, the temperature is high and the dialogue is inflamed, there also seems to be a more direct on-ramp to my own personal truth. I don’t recall a time in the past when my own personal truth mattered as much as it does now. I do recall growing up and looking outside myself to discover my values. I was always afraid and I wanted to be brave. I wanted to comfort my parents and follow the rules. I desperately wanted to be noticed and would often freeze and collapse when I was. I wanted to be a good girl – pleasing and lovable. I wanted the people around me to get along and to see

the best in each other and the world around us. I did not want the rage and seething bitterness I felt inside me to see the light of day.

At this moment, while I can recognize and feel the threads of my personal history, those chords are no longer motivating my choices. It's as if the old structure collapsed and disintegrated. In its place, I see my personal truth more intently. At this time, my truth includes valuing civic virtue, having fun and moving through fear to a place of flow.

The social, economic and political collapse around me is unavoidable. The options I see for dealing with it include:

- 1: Papering over it ("*this too shall pass*")
- 2: Pushing it away & retreating into a smaller & more isolated place in my home and with like-minded people in my community
- 3: Fighting with those I disagree or who threaten my beliefs
- 4: Working and creating compulsively to shore up against the collapse
- 5: Drowning, self-medicating and swimming in depression
- 6: Choosing and acting moment to moment from my personal truth

I choose #6. For some reason, this time of collapse has provided me with a clearer access to my own personal truth and curiosity. My main curiosity is about what genuine leadership and collaboration looks like in a post Dominator/Victim/Winner/Loser world.

My personal truth includes focusing on the kindness inside me and in front of me. It includes saying No, politely and honestly without a lot of narrative. It also includes not looking to a political party or ideology or a charismatic leader to save me or the world.

I've been waiting since I was a little girl for the world to be a kinder and more collaborative place. That desire hasn't gone away but the bitter disappointment at not seeing that kindness has metabolized into a clear personal truth that now guides my choices. I see the cruelty inside myself now as easily as I see it in the tyrant and despot-

wannabes on the national and international stage. When heartlessness is in front of me, I can now sense it immediately inside of me.

My personal truth seeks fun, flow, integrity, ethics, honesty, curiosity and appreciation for the beauty and pleasure that goes along with being human on the earth now. The sun is rising and the birds are singing and I can either notice or not.

The collapse in our political system is dramatic and it's hard to look at it or look away. At the same time, my personal truth is lighter, more fun and more fluid than the heavy and serious personality that frequently jumps into the driver's seat and wants to take control of my life. When my personal truth is in the driver's seat, I immediately spot partners and collaborators from miles away. Connections happen and progress is made in bringing about innovation.

I'm particularly interested in having a resilient, vital and evolving judicial system that supports our country's constitutional democracy. I feel lucky to be a US citizen. Right now, collaborative innovation asks the question: "How?" How do I engage more effectively with my duties as a US citizen? How do I metabolize this moment of hatred, dishonesty, fear and gas-lighting to bring about an even stronger constitutional democracy? I believe deeply in the integrity of our system of government with its three co-equal branches. I've watched our balance of powers support our country to confront harsh truths and grow stronger. Even when our system disappoints and corrupts, I believe it is worth engaging to form a more perfect union. Even when we are living in a moment of continuous disinformation and accusation, collaborative innovation is accessible if we're paying attention.

The judicial system was designed to be as immune as possible from the vagaries of political life. Judges are frequently appointed by politicians, and grapple with rulings that affect the political system. A judge's code of ethics requires a willingness to look beyond the politics of the moment to a deeper understanding of the constitution and the

rule of law. Is that still possible or has that ship already sailed, as some want us to believe? If we stop believing and working toward that aspiration, it stops existing.

Back to the question “How?” How do we recognize corruption where it exists without burning down the whole house? In the judicial system, facts, ethics and honesty are highly valued. With the collapse and disintegration of trust, I ask “How and where do I bring honor to my world?” When I ask this question, I immediately attract people who are asking the same question, and collaborative innovation kicks almost automatically into high gear.

When I’m having fun, feeling alive on the inside, and digging deep with curiosity into what’s in front of me, I always see the on-ramp to collaborative innovation.

Marilyn J. Smith is the director of civil justice programs for the Indiana Bar Foundation where she focuses on access to justice and pro bono grant programs and initiatives. From 2005 to 2011, Marilyn was the Executive Director of the Center for Conflict Resolution where she was responsible for providing dispute resolution, facilitation and training services throughout the greater Chicago metropolitan area.

Previously, Marilyn served as the Executive Director of the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation; the Assistant Committee Counsel for the American Bar Association Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service; and as an ombudsperson at William Rainey Harper College in Palatine, Illinois.

Marilyn received her B.A. from Northwestern University and her J.D. from Columbia University School of Law. She received a certificate in Negotiation and Dispute Resolution from The Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School; and certification as a mediator from the Center for Conflict Resolution. She is licensed to practice law in Indiana and Illinois.

Marilyn currently serves as the chair of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation Social Justice Committee and is a member of the FBI Citizens Academy. She lives with her husband, Andy and her 17-year old daughter, Lily, in Indianapolis.