The Craft of Public Work: William Doherty
Interviewed by Harry Boyte
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William Doherty, professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota and recent past president of the National Council on Family Relations, is one of the nation's leading theorists and practitioners of family studies and family therapy. Since 1996 he has been engaged in action research projects to develop examples of family practice as "democratic public work." Doherty and his graduate students, organized in a group called "Families and Democracy Project," are also thinking about how to recast the fields of family studies, family therapy and family life education in civic and public terms. They are involved in a number of partnerships including those described below: Family Life 1st, a movement started by parents, community members, school leaders, youth activities directors and others in Wayzata, Minnesota in 1999 to restore balance in families' hectic and overscheduled lives; and ECFE Around the Block, a project with the Early Childhood Family Education network in Minnesota to develop the capacity of family educators to stimulate public work by parents of young children on the public dimensions of issues facing families. Family Life 1st has been featured in The New York Times, Newsweek, Time, the Today Show and elsewhere, and is spreading to other communities (its web site is http://FamilyLife1st.org).

In the following, Doherty begins with a discussion of his evolution in family theory and practice from a focus on individuals to a focus on couples and families in the context of communities. He describes his discovery of a public work model as a way for families to take action, and concludes with thoughts on how this work can expand and grow.

Putting the community back in

Boyte: Maybe you could begin with the story of how you came to a focus on community.

Doherty: This began in 1985. I had my liberal progressive critique of Reaganomics, of materialism and consumerism in American culture, well in place. I saw my world, the therapists' world, as the good guys. We were on the side of the angels. My public model didn't run deep. If only McGovern had gotten elected president in 1972, everything would have been fine, I thought. I certainly had never been exposed to any critique that showed my own profession to part of a set of larger social problems.

But I must have been open to some self-reflection. When I saw the review of ***Habits of the Heart*** by Bob Bellah and others in the ***The New York Times*** [in 1985] something told me it would be good for me to read a book that revisited de Tocqueville for our era. I got the book expand my critique of what was going on in American society, but not to be challenged in my own work.

In one of the early chapters, the authors interviewed a therapist in California, and asked her why she was committed to her children. She answered exactly the way I would have answered: "These are my values. I would feel guilty if I abandoned my children." When the interviewers probed more deeply for the source of her values, she stayed at the personal, psychological level. She couldn't live with herself if she did not stay faithful to her children. Would she want others

to hold similar values? Everyone has to choose their own values, she maintained, and it's not for her to impose her values on others. It's just that she personally holds her commitment to her children as very important.

Now I had a background in theology and philosophy. I could do better than that. But I don't know that I would have been any more articulate about my own values as a parent if they had asked me. I realized that I had bought into the discourse of private psychology.

It was shocking to me that this therapist could not speak in terms of public morality, let alone a private morality that had some teeth and grounding and depth—and that I might not have done any better in the interview! Tomorrow she could wake up with a revised set of values. She could suddenly say, "I'm not into kids any more." I have a cartoon that illustrates. Two couples meet on the street. One looks bedraggled, the other couple say, "we decided we missed going to the theater, so we gave up our children."

Anyway, my hair stood up as I read this passage and the author's critique of what the therapist was saying. I remember sitting in the chair transfixed. I couldn't distance myself from this example. The authors were not saying she's an immoral person. They acknowledged that she probably was as committed to her children as any of us. But look what she's caught up with. I knew about economic individualism. But Habits of the Heart introduced the term "expressive individualism," the psychological fraternal twin the economic individualism. The book turned my critique of Reagon back against me, and I was never the same. I realized that I, and my profession, were part of the problem and not just part of the solution to our country's social problems.

For a couple of years I stayed conceptual in how this affected me. Then I had my paradigmatic political case, Bruce, a man who felt it was perfectly okay to walk out on his responsibilities as a father, and whom I directly challenged to do the right thing. That was my turning point as a practitioner. I began to talk about that case. I wrote a piece for the ***Family Therapy Networker*** magazine in 1991, titled "I'm Okay, You're Okay, But What About the Kids?" I knew I had to write about the community dimension of psychotherapy practice. I realized that people on the political right like to talk about private morality but they don't think much about public morality, and that people on the left go the other way—hold the society responsible but stay away from preaching personal morality. I knew I had to transcend that dichotomy. This led me to write my book Soul Searching (Basics Books, 1995), which critiqued the individualism and anti-community emphasis of much psychotherapy. I proposed a model that included both private responsibilities and public responsibilities.

The therapeutic community had already come to realize that the broader community contributes to individuals' problems. Therapists were learning not to blame the victim. But the idea of citizenship was absent from psychotherapy and family practice: the arrow that goes from the client to community was pretty much missing. I wrote about that in Soul Searching, but I was aware that the chapter on community was incomplete. I raised the issues, but did not yet have a community model that ran deep, and certainly did not yet know how to incorporate citizenship and community deeply into my work. I knew that's where I needed to go next, in the late 1990s.

Communitarianism was a good model to start from, a both/and, private/public philosophy. I had discovered Amitai Etzioni and Alan Wolfe and other communitarian thinkers while writing my book. But communitarianism was not a guide to action, at least for me. I was looking to do something. My colleague and friend Patrick Dougherty and I were having discussions about what a citizen therapist would actually do in the world.

Boyte: Is this when you started the salons? *[The "salons" were discussion groups for family therapists across the country on the community dimensions of practice. They expanded rapidly, but briefly, in the mid-1990s, in association with the Family Therapy Networker magazine.]*

Doherty: Yes. The salons [outside of Minnesota they were called Networker Forums] were an effort to create a collective way for therapists to think these issues. It turns out in retrospect that the reason people often joined these forum groups was that they were feeling frustrated about managed care. They really were not into the community part of therapy.

But these groups also tapped into the idealism of therapists who had entered the field in the sixties. At the initial organizing meetings, people talked in a kind of agonized way about "what happened to me? I went into this work thinking myself as a radical, planning to change the world. And I settled into private practice. I wanted to put my kids through college. I'm so exhausted at the end of the week I don't have time to volunteer. And now managed care is boxing me in."

The frustrated idealism was palpable.

What people would do with this frustration was write letters to public officials, and say to themselves, "I should do more. I should do some more pro bono work. I should volunteer more." But when they did volunteer, they felt like they were neglecting their families. And they're getting older so they didn't have as much energy.

I didn't have the words for it, but I knew something was missing from how we were all thinking about ourselves as citizens and professionals. And then Patrick Dougherty met you and Nan Kari. We were looking around for some action approach, and we knew these salons were not doing it.

Adding public work

Boyte: What did you see in the public work approach?

Doherty: Let me go back to ***Habits of the Heart***. The book was a cultural critique of the society, at about the fifty-thousand foot level, but it was not really about change, or creating a social movement. I saw in ***Building America*** (***Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work,*** a historical and theoretical description of the framework) as about big ideas. It was a very big critique of the passivity of citizens, of the consumer culture, that I resonated with. But the book was also action oriented. The stories, the examples, the going back through history and retrieving exciting populist movements – that was clearly what it was going to take to make change occur. There was a craft of social change that we needed to retrieve. So, I now had the

cultural critique tied to a critique of professional practice, and a framework for action through a reformulation of what is meant by work in a democracy.

That was the biggest thing, the idea that change gets done through the work. What I was hearing from therapists was, "I have to volunteer more. I have to work outside of my profession." So this whole idea of reconceptualizing professions as public activities, of seeing professions as groups that have a stake in the public welfare, was very powerful.

At that point the book wasn't even in galley form, just the typed manuscript. Reading it became my 1990s version of reading ***Habits of the Heart.***.

Boyte: You started off with a very action oriented approach, like an action research project. You wanted to actually figure out how to do public work.

Doherty: Patrick and I had been having lunch together monthly for five years. We were serious. But we knew we needed to be in dialogue with our colleagues.

We organized the workshop in the spring of 1996 *[a daylong workshop on the framework of public work, involving twenty five therapists from Minnesota]*. The workshop was a deepening experience. I saw you and Nan do it, do public work. You both engaged a group around our passions and interests, you brought a perspective, and you dealt with the skepticism and diversity of the group.

So then we pulled together a group called Psychotherapy and Public Work Project, consisting of about eight people from the all-day workshop. We met monthly for a couple of years. That turned out to be a very important experience, even though the group never found its mission.

We decided to bring in informants to help us rethink healing, what it meant to be a healer in this era. We brought in an American Indian healer and leader from the Hmong community. Both of them knew western traditions and indigenous traditions of healing. We talked to social activists as well. These conversations were a way for me to compare what the informants said with my new emerging understanding of the public work model. So when one social activist, for example, suggested that we could help the community by supporting anti-depression billboards, I thought, this is a great idea but it's not what I am looking for.

The Native American therapist/healer Sam Gurnoe was probably the most inspiring. He had a great line: "Outside of a culture, a community, and a spirituality, you can treat but you cannot heal." He talked about the power of community rituals. That was an electrifying experience.

But I found that nobody else in the group besides me and Patrick would read your book.

Boyte: Why was that?

Doherty: Well, some of it was that Patrick and I were interested in them reading the book. We were their professional siblings, and people don't like to do what their siblings want them to do. Indirectly, members were also saying, "The ideas can't be that complicated." I had found before

that there were very few people in my salon group were willing to read my book ***Soul Searching.*** It's hard to study the work of close peers.

The bottom line is that Patrick and I were interested in transforming the way we did practice. Others saw it as a discussion group with interesting guest speakers.

Boyte: Do you think they didn't have the same passion around changing the field, or that they couldn't imagine changing the field?

Doherty: People were into the group to connect their sense of themselves as professionals with broader issues. They had been in the workshop and knew what it was about. But I go back to the idea that we didn't yet have a craft, the set of practices. It was very hard to see how to do the translation.

There were little successes. Somebody who was a hospital administrator in one of the local hospitals was using some of the principles with her staff. She was rethinking the top down approach. It wasn't like people weren't getting anything, because the core group kept coming for a couple of years.

Boyte: How many came throughout?

Doherty: If I had to think for the whole two years, it was probably seven, with others coming in and out. One of the things we'd say from time to time was, should we have a common project? But we couldn't get everyone together around any specific project.

In retrospect, how in the world could we agree on a project? That logjam would happen in the salon network too. People would say, "Why don't we all volunteer in the same service project?" But they didn't have time and all anyone could think of was volunteer work. Eventually, though, a group is going to need some sort of action, or it will become a book club or a support group.

So, we all decided the group had run its course. We sunsetted the Minnesota Psychotherapy and Public Work Project. We had a nice party at the end. It was time to take the next step.

While the group had been meeting, and following the inspiration of Sam Gurnoe, Patrick and I tried to get a public work project going around the theme of intergenerational rituals. We had some meetings with religious leaders, with Catholic lay leaders. Once again, people were inspired. Although we didn't have a specific project in mind at the beginning, but people in the group started to talk about their aging, frail parents, and how there was so little support for middle-aged people coping with this stage of life. I suggested a public work project in this area. The idea lit up that group. There was a sense of, let's meet again and see if we could use a more grass roots, democratic approach, instead of the traditional program approach. But then Lent was coming, and Easter. They called back and said they were just overwhelmed.

What I realized was that these were program implementers who were already maxed out. Although we were talking about a "non-program approach," a citizen approach, they of course thought they were going to be running it. They asked themselves, do we have time and energy for a new program that would involve learning a new model? I have seen this consistently with

professionals who are inspired by the public work model but feel intimidated about what they would have to stop doing in order to make it happen in their community, and about the retooling of their skills they would need to do.
This was a time of frustration for me in this work. People admired what I was saying. But they didn't really understand it, let alone have a clue how to do it. I finally realized that it was because I didn't have the craft--the theory but not the skills to make the theory come alive. The breakthrough came after a conversation with a friend who had been part of the Minnesota Psychotherapists and Public Work group. He is smart and he cares deeply about social justice. We were on a bus from the airport to the hotel before a conference when I brought up the public work model. He said something to this effect: "Bill, I am glad you are fired up about this, but I still don't know what the hell you're talking about." That was a wake up call! If smart people of good will didn't know what the hell I was talking about, then I didn't know what the hell I was talking about. I had the theory disconnected from the practice.

Family time as a public question

Getting back to the efforts Patrick and I were making: Just getting Patrick and me in the same room with all these people was horrendous in terms of schedule. And Patrick's interest was turning more to Qi Gong, the Chinese healing art, as an alternative to traditional psychotherapy. That's when I realized that I needed to launch out on my own. I needed to be looking for an opportunity to engage in something myself with a community. Not have to do it with Patrick or with a group of therapists.

Meanwhile I was giving talks in various communities about family rituals, about the intentional family—the subject of my book for parents, The Intentional Family. And I kept hearing back, "It's a great idea, but we don't have time to do anything as a family."

I would ask, "How come you don't have any time to do anything?"

They would say, "Oh, we're so involved with taking our kids in their sports and over activities."

I would then ask, "How come you can't change that?"

"How could we possibly change that?" they would say. "We want our kids to succeed, and everyone else's kids are doing these things."

I was picking up the themes that I folded into my next book, ***Take Back Your Kids***, about the frenetic pace and about insecure parenting in a competitive consumer culture. Each time I talked with parents, I folded their concerns into my next talk and into chapters of my book.

The breakthrough was in Wayzata in April, 1998, after a talk to this large group of parents at a parent fair. The parents were lit up over the problem of feeling out of control of their time but afraid to get off the treadmill. A middle school principal told me something I had not thought about much before. Speaking about educational and community activity leaders, he said, "We're part of this problem. We offer so many activities to kids that if parents agree to half of them, they're not going to have much of a family life left."

That was the dawning for me that this issue of over-scheduling was not just an individual family issue and a cultural issue. It was a structural issue as well. I talked to other people and light bulbs started coming on for me and them both. Family time is a public issue.

A couple of months later, the organizer of the original parent fair, Barbara Carlson, called and said, "People loved your talk. Would you come back next year and give that talk again." I said, "no." That was the moment that I decided to go for it. I said, "I only give the same talk once. I don't want to give Doherty's greatest hits. But if you want to take on this problem as a community, I've been learning a model to do this, and I'd be willing to come back and work with you to figure out how to do it."

Barbara was running the Communities and Collaboration Council that came out of a Search Institute's asset building approach. She knew the Wayzata community well. She and I proceeded to cook up what would happen the next spring. I would give a brief talk and then there would be a town meeting.

About seventy came to the town meeting. Barbara had invited parent leaders, school board people, plus any of the two hundred or so parents who were at the first talk. These people were really ready. I began by asking, "Are these things we are talking about here, overscheduled kids and underconnected families, only individual family problems or are they also community problems? Are the solutions only individual family solutions, or are they also community solutions?" And "what can we do about the problems as a community?"

It was an electrifying experience.

People began by talking at individual tables. Then I invited a sampling of what each table came up with. Then I asked, "Is somebody else really burning to add something."

It was at that point that a mother said, "I could use something like a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval when I'm signing up my kids. Something that would show that this organization will work me in my efforts to have a balanced family life."

There were people from the YMCA, the head of community education, and other people who scheduled kids and families. They were saying, "I agree with what is being said here, but I don't get any complaints about having a facility too available. Or having too many games. I get complaints like 'why are you closing the swimming pool at 11 on Sunday night?'

(One activity leader told a small group privately afterwards, "I could leverage a Seal of Approval for change in my organization." It took somebody who was involved in scheduling to have that perspective.)

It was then that I re-emphasized the no-villains approach I had brought up in my public talk. I said, "I don't think anybody is setting out to hurt kids, but there are a lot of constraints people work under. We are all part of this problem, and we can all be part of the solution."

Another important moment came when I heard the classic deflators of energy in a public meeting. One woman sitting in the front declared, "This is all well and good but we're preaching to the choir. It's the parents who are not here who are the problem."

Then somebody added, "There should have been three times as many people here tonight." That's another deflator.

This is where my family therapy experience comes in. I'm used to working with families where somebody in the room pulls the plug on something positive that is happening, and I am prepared to head it off. So I immediately responded, "Margaret Mead once said, 'it only takes a small group of people to change the world, and it's never been changed in any other way.' Every social movement begins with a choir. And we have a lot of people in this choir."

I could feel the energy coming back into the room.

Then I added, "If only twelve people had shown up here with the passion and energy I see in this room, I would have been happy."

The plan was to have people to sign up for something. One group was the community activation team, a group who were to think this problem through and to go through a democratic process to decide what the community might do. Others signed up to be kept informed. We had the date already planned for the first meeting of the community activation team. That became the steering group for Family Life 1st.

That was the process whereby I launched myself into the craft of public work. Once I was into it, I knew I needed to meet with you and Nan more often. I knew the theory itself through my readings and our conversations. I knew enough to get started, but I needed to talk with you to help me with the next steps and the problems.

From this experience and from my later experience working with graduate students and other family professionals, I've concluded that a mentoring process is necessary to learn the public work model. It takes conceptual mentoring and craft mentoring for someone to have enough of a transformation in their professional identity and skills to do public work.

Now I'm prepared to say to those who want to learn the Families and Democracy model, which is what I call my application of the public work model to work with families. "We have to have a mentoring relationship, and then hopefully you can mentor others in the future." This work is not going to spread in the traditional workshop training mode.

My own next developmental step is to learn to mentor others in this work. I have four graduate students working on projects with me (John Beaton, Tai Mendenhall, Amanda Richards and Jason Carroll, and three other professionals have come forward to start learning the model through projects of their own.

The Families and Democracy Project

The Families and Democracy Project, which I started with my graduate students at yours and Nan Kari's suggestion, has a mission of developing the theory and practice of democratic public work in the family field. We are focusing on the craft of public work with families, and on how to influence the paradigm and practice of our field. Our big dream is to renew and transform family science and practice as work by and with citizens.

Public faces of private issues

Boyte: Tell me about ECFE Around the Block

Doherty: ECFE Around the Block is a project I have been doing with parent educators and parent leaders involved with Early Childhood Family Education in Minnesota. We have met monthly for a couple of years to think through the public dimensions of the work of parent educators. It has been a fascinating experience, with a good degree of struggle and confusion along the way. At the beginning, we fell into focusing on public action by parents as a core outcome of ECFE classes. What happened was that many of the parent educators felt pressured to make action occur and then felt overwhelmed about how that could happen. When we role played parent education classes, they wanted to jump to action steps too quickly. Some of this occurred because one of the parent educators was a natural community activist. She had lots of examples of civic action with parents, as did one of her former students. The other parent educators felt inadequate to that task. The other reason it occurred is that I think we were not taking a developmental approach to public work in parent education.

Then in one meeting I realized that we were dichotomizing private parenting and public parenting. One of the parent educators explained why she was not engaging in public conversation with parents this particular semester. She said that her classes were not far along in terms of number of sessions and group cohesion. It was not time to bring in public issues, she said. In a blinding flash of obvious insight, I saw her assumption that public discourse about parenting was more difficult and more threatening than private discourse about parenting.

So, I said, "Let's take the issue of trying to get kids to bed." I went to the board and said, "Are there public dimensions to bedtime hassles?" Everyone had something to say: parents' work schedules, kids' extracurricular schedules, homework, television, families who lack space for kids to sleep on their own, and so on. So then I asked, "Why do these public questions have to come later in the group? Why could one not start out a discussion about bedtime with, 'Why is it so hard for so many parents in our society to have a bedtime for their kids?' No one is going to run screaming out of the room if you ask this. No one is going to say 'I paid for something else!'"

I added, "I think that our reluctance is more about our own discomfort with bringing up public issues and how to facilitate a discussion of them." That's when I realized that I always begin my public presentations on overscheduled kids with public questions: How many of you think that too many kids and families in this community are overscheduled and have lost too much of their family time and family rituals like dinners and family outings? And, why do you think this is

happening in this community and all over? I give people a moment of silence to think of their answers, and then I asked them to pair up with someone they did not come with for four minutes to share their answers. Then I pool their answers with the whole group. Only later in the talk do I get to the private domain of what individual families can do in their homes. I have found that people feel energized when they are asked to think about the public dimensions of their personal problems, and this civic dialogue enriches the discussion about what individual families can do.

Anyway, challenging the public-private split in parent education was intervention number one. (I was able to connect this work with my previous experience in family medicine, where I worked to help physicians not perpetuate a mind-body-family split, where biomedical conversation must always come first and the mind-family conversation is scary and clumsy--an add-on that the patient may experience as a jarring switch. The best physicians interweave the biomedical and psychosocial in a seamless way.) The ECFE Around the Block group decided to focus this coming year on developing the craft of public-private parent education, but without worrying about whether every conversation leads to public action. We realized that the base of the pyramid of citizen work in parent education was this kind of civic dialogue seamlessly interwoven into parenting classes. The group visibly relaxed when we removed the action expectation.

About the same time, I came to the conclusion that the public action dimension of parent education has to be a program-level initiative and not just something that an individual parent educator engages in with parents. Unless you have a gifted community activitist/parent educator like Beth Cutting (who is the parent educator I referred to earlier), it is too intimidating for a solo professional. A civic action project with families will take a program-wide partnership with a lot of visibility in the community.

At this point, we had defined two core activities of ECFE Around the Block: weaving public issues into everyday parent education in the classroom, and public action in partnership with parents. All the parent educators wanted to work on the first activity, and three of the seven programs also felt ready to work on public action. So we agreed to meet next year to self-consciously develop the craft of public-private parent education, with the goal of being able to teach other parent educators the following year. And we agreed that I would meet separately with the sub-group who want to develop a public action project. The first public action group to get going, by the way, has decided to focus on the issue of safety, which is of great concern to parents in their rural-becoming-suburban community north of the Twin Cities.

It's taken two years of monthly meetings (plus two day-long retreats) to figure out how to begin to approach public work in parent education. This work takes patience!

Boyte: Say more about how this developed over time. Did you draw on parent educators who were already involved in helping parents work on public issues, like Beth Cutting? How are parent educators trained?

Doherty: Yes, and it was also thinking about her work that made me realize the connection between the classroom discussions and the civic action. She and Karen Rader, another parent educator whom she had mentored, are so good at the public/private classroom dialogue that it seems effortless. But I realized that they are so good because they are also activists who have

internalized a public perspective. Ultimately, there will be limits to the level of classroom dialogue if the parent educator has not internalized a public identity as a professional, and there is no way to do that, I believe, unless you get involved in civic action. But developmentally it has to begin with everyday consciousness and conversation in one's routine work as a professional.

The danger with professionals who are far ahead of others in their field is that their colleagues will admire them but distance. I had realized that in medicine, teaching in family practice, that exemplars who are far in front in psychosocial skills can have double-edged effects. People admire them but see them as having unique gifts or circumstances that others cannot emulate. So Beth Cutting will be an important part of ECFE Around the Block, but others will need to co-lead these next phases. (Beth is sharp enough to understand all of this.) Otherwise, other parent educators will create distance from her work in interesting ways, such as saying that her kids are already raised, so she has time for these evening meetings.

Boyte: How do you imagine expanding it through ECFE? It's an enormous network *[several hundred thousand parents of young children a year in Minnesota take ECFE parenting classes.*]

Doherty: First we have to learn it ourselves. That's the other thing that I have been really emphasizing in all the families and democracy projects. No expansion until there's depth. So I'm really content with the plan for next year. My goal would be to have extension come after that.

Another thing I've learned to stress is the difference between this work, which is more populist, and the "pedagogy of the oppressed" approach, which is more left wing. I've been stressing to all the ECFE educators really strongly, "If Republicans cannot be part of this, it's not populist. We need to have Democrats and Republicans and born again Christians and all social classes, and we need to have Nader voters and Green party people. That mix is who comes to the ECFE classes." And if the parent educator has to be a leftist to get into public work, it will not go beyond a tiny minority and will fail to transform the profession. And that means not seeing the world only in terms of oppressors and the oppressed, of those in power and those without power, of conspiratorial institutions and noble citizens. My mantra in this work is that we are all part of the problem and can all be part of the solution. That does not mean being naï ve about power, but it means that we all have self-interest involved and we can all leverage power from where we sit in the community.

Boyte: You Have a Diabetes Project in a Medical Setting. Can you describe it briefly?

The Partners in Diabetes Project was something I began to work on at the same time as Family Life 1st, but it has taken longer to put on the ground. Medical settings are the hardest place to bring the public work model, in my experience. My idea was to bring the public work model to the practice of health care by engaging consumers of health care in the role of partners in producing health care. I approached a large HMO with this idea, and they steered me to diabetes as an illness that frustrates the health care system and that requires mostly the efforts of those with the illness to manage it. One of the clinics was intrigued, and we used a democratic planning process over a two year period between clinic staff and patient members, based on the public work model. The goal is to improve the lives of people with diabetes through engaging

the previously untapped expertise and resources of patients (we call them "members") and families in becoming stakeholders in one anothers' health care. To do this, we created a diabetes support partner program for pairing up people with each other for support and coaching on living with diabetes.

Fourteen support partners, nominated by their primary physicians from two clinics, have completed 19 hours of training, using a curriculum that was democratically developed by the planning group. The training was a collaborative process drawing on both medical expertise and the expertise of the trainees. The support partners have now been paired with people seeking support, and are forming these partnerships. There will be monthly meetings of the support partners, who are also in contact with clinic staff. The response and buy-in of the support partners and those they are visiting has been nothing short of scintillating. Decisions about the program will continued to be made in a democratic fashion, with everyone offering unique expertise to fashion an initiative that works for the benefit of everyone involved. We look to create smooth pathways from being a recipient of support to becoming a support partner and then a leader in the clinic and community. The grand vision of this small project is to create a democratic model of health care that unleashes the capacities of people in communities to become stakeholders in one another's health and health care.

Boyte: Your fourth project is a marriage initiative. What's happening there?

For this project, I was able to learn from what went well and not so well in my earlier ones. I was approached by a lay leader at Pax Christi, a large, liberal Catholic parish in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. An ecumenical center connected to the parish, named the Leaven Center, was interested in supporting "incubator" projects that could be spread to other faith communities, and lay leader Carolyn von Weiss thought they might be interested in a marriage project. So she approached, and I offered to facilitate a families and democracy project.

The basic idea is that most people live their married lives isolated from community support and lack opportunities to give support to others. (I wrote in my latest book, Take Back Your Marriage, about isolated "consumer marriage" in today's culture.) Using the public work approach that I have now formulated into a series of steps in engaging a community in action, we pulled together a coordinating group of married people and went through a year long process of creating a mission and desired future, doing stakeholder interviews throughout the community, and generating action initiatives that are about to launch soon.

The big vision behind this initiative, called "Marriage Matters," is to forge a community where every marriage flourishes and every couple is a giver and receiver of support. It's a non-program approach, the first of its kind that I know of in the country, that is based not on an expert model but a citizen model. We've got about 30 couples involved in leadership roles right now, and the idea is to expand this circle as the action initiatives take hold. The initial action projects are a babysitting coop so that couples can do on marital dates, an anniversary celebration initiative where couples married on the same month will plan and carry out renewal rituals each year, a mentor initiative in which experienced couples will help less experienced couples, and a series of small groups for individual spouses to explore the cultural messages about being a husband or wife and work together to improve in this role.

There is already a lot of national interest in the Marriage Matters initiative. In the next year or two, I believe that it will influence what faith communities are doing for marriage, and perhaps generate new models of citizen engagement in all aspects of religious community.

Boyte: What's Next for You--Changing the Profession?

This is the biggest challenge--changing the profession. Right now, I am focusing on expanding the number of people engaged in the families and democracy work. It will take a small cadre of people to begin to make an impact on the field. Right now, it's too confined to me and my students, even though we are getting visibility at national meetings. We need to build a local, and eventually a national, team of family professionals generating theory and craft skills, and eventually research. With ECFE Around the Block, I think we are working close to the core of what family life educators do. With family therapists, I don't think we are there yet, because our projects are things that therapists would do outside of their everyday clinical setting. As important as community-focused projects are for therapists to get out of their offices, I think that the breakthrough initiative for therapists will be something closer to the Partners in Diabetes project, where we learn to bring clients and former clients into the creation of healing, democratic communities instead of just into treatment centers.

I recently heard a presentation by four senior family therapy scholars who were regretting that they had not made more of their careers, having been buried in day-to-day teaching and clinical administration and worrying that their research had not made a difference for practitioners. I was sitting in the same room feeling fired up about my work, partly because I see myself as a catalyst and not as a lone ranger. Some of the difference is inborn temperament (I got the optimistic Irish genes, not the depressive ones), but some of it is working with a different paradigm. Citizenship work has transformed my career and renewed the sense of idealism that brought me to this field.