

Ralph Nader: Angel or Devil?

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By Raymond Pavlak, Ph.D.

The biblical saying that prophets are not honored in their own houses is being played out very vividly in the controversy now raging in Winsced which surrounds the Nader Trust.

Like a prophet of old, Ralph Nader has noticed that his fellow townspeople have strayed and he is trying to get them to recognize this and return to the true path which promises a more satisfying life for all.

Unlike the Hebrew prophets, however, Ralph exhorts us to the true political, not religious path. This path, democracy, is the one our forefathers started blazing in 1776 through revolution at a risk of their lives and fortunes. We, like every generation of Americans, need to affirm our support of democracy and to move in our practice of democracy as close to the ideal as possible.

This challenge laid down to each generation is not easy to meet. Most of us are busy and let the job of governing fall to the professional politician. The problem is that those who take the time to govern soon are corrupted by power and begin to believe they own the system. The average citizen is tolerated only because his vote is needed to legitimize election of candidates selected by the party bosses.

In addition, those who hold office soon tend to become isolated and arrogant. Few are able to accept outside suggestions let alone criticism. The Nader study in the 80s found fear, arrogance, and apathy in local government but it also found tools existing in the town charter that provide citizens the means of participatory, democratic action.

The situation was not hopeless, however, but how could the process be jump-started? Ralph couldn't oversee the daily operation nor did he have the time needed to teach citizens their rights or to model ways of getting action. The answer was to use funds from the Shafek Nader Trust to hire a community lawyer. As the citizen's advocate he would help counterbalance the power of government which has its own lawyers and almost unlimited tax monies available to accomplish its desires.

I never met the first community lawyer but the present one, Charlene LaVoie, is an outstanding person. She is highly intelligent, quick to grasp the essence of a situation or problem, willing to assist any citizen with governmental legal questions, and a good teacher of citizenship skills. Most important is her high energy level and enthusiasm. She is a perfect person to provide the power for the jump-start needed to revive citizen interest and action in Winchester's government.

Charlene's willingness to challenge officials when she believes them to be wrong or when they act in a patronizing or arrogant way is upsetting to many. Yet, I think it is

necessary at this stage, as Claire Nader put it, to help citizens get over their fear in the face of governmental officials. I saw an example of this at the recent public explanation of the education budget. Although I think highly of Superintendent Bristol as a person and professional, he did come across as a stern schoolmaster scolding his students (not right).

In addition, the community lawyer has been consistent and non-partisan in her public activities and comments. The lawsuits she filed, her criticism of the movement of funds by the Selectmen and other criticisms of the Town Manager all rest on the basis that she believed their actions violated a provision of the Town Charter which is the fundamental law of the town.

One of her major goals is to get both citizens and officials to realize there is a town charter and to follow its provisions. Charlene finds the charter is of prime importance because it places the government in the hands of the townspeople. Many of our Torrington neighbors would like to have this privilege and envy Winchester. Our charter accomplishes this by means of the town meeting acting as a legislature, working with the Selectmen and Town Manager acting as the executive branch.

Another major goal is to obtain openness in government. Citizens should demand and officials should provide as much openness of action as possible. Closed meetings can easily lead to abuse of power whereas open meetings encourage accountability.

To my mind, Winchester is fortunate to have a son of the stature and vision of Ralph Nader and a family as caring and generous to the community. Some may described the work of Nader Trust as "fluff" or may be suspicious of its intention, but I find its contribution of \$20,000 to the Children's Community Playscape and sponsoring of the "charrette" to plan the town's future quite substantial and the purpose of the community lawyer to be straightforward and completely above-board.

I find no devils here. Probably as in the case of the prophets the criticism is a mix of jealousy and envy in the community over the importance and popularity attained by the Naders. Actually, the politicians have more a questioning, politically active citizenry than a conspiracy which they are used to hatching themselves.

In the past the benevolence of William L. Gilman gave us a water system and the Gilbert School. The Naders are giving the town the opportunity to get control of our government men and officials (which they don't like).

My thanks to the Naders and Charlene LaVoie. It's nice to have you as neighbors.