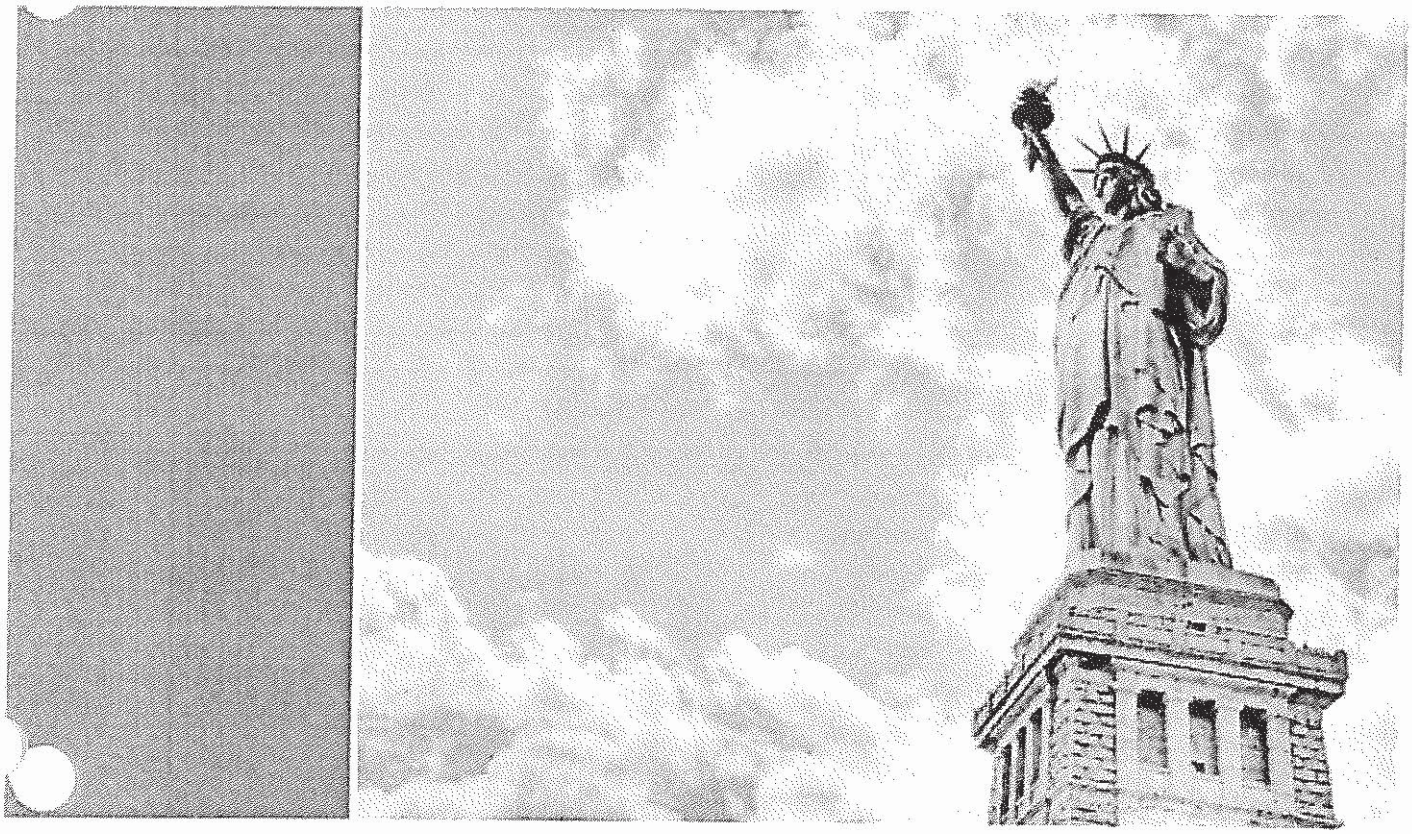

This land is your land

Telling American Stories

By Heath Wickline

The word "values" has taken on a great deal of importance in recent years. It has been used to explain the ascendancy of conservative politics in America over the past several decades and as the defining issue of the 2004 presidential election. It has been held up as the key to effective framing, and repeated *ad nauseam* by pundits and politicians who seem intent on stripping it of all meaning. Values are, of course, much more than the communications buzzword of this political moment. They are also much less than the silver bullet that some of the more vocal advocates of framing would have you believe. Values are the morals that underly the stories we tell each other about ourselves as Americans. They have a great deal to say about what we consider most important, most *valuable*, in our own lives and in our society. They help to explain not only who we are, but how we see ourselves.

Understanding how values have shaped our history, our politics, and our society can be immensely useful as we work to convince our fellow Americans of the justness of the causes for which we are fighting. Many progressive communicators have accepted the idea that facts and figures,—that merely being right— will not change minds. We must convince on a much deeper level. Telling our stories—connecting our work with a set of American values shared by individuals from across the political spectrum, and defining the issues that we care about in terms of those values—can be a first step toward winning the support of people who might never have considered it otherwise. Evoking these shared values is about more than scoring political victories though. As advocates and communicators, we have a responsibility to define our vision for our society: What is it that is good in America, what should be nurtured and preserved? What must change if we are to live up to the high ideals of this nation's founding? And how can we get there? Americans are a deeply optimistic people, and they are hungry for a positive vision for the country's future, free from the fear and division that have marred our politics in recent years. They know the country is headed in the wrong direction (just ask the pollsters), and are ready to support the real changes we're advocating, if we'll only explain those changes in terms of the values we share.

Why Tell American Stories?

There's no denying that the idea of telling an American story, of invoking values, is something that progressives have had real trouble with and sometimes even rejected outright. What good is telling a story when we're fighting to defeat a ballot measure or win community benefits on a new development project? Why talk about values when it seems they only ever get mentioned when someone's telling us that we don't have them? Whose American story are we talking about? Why tell American stories anyway?

For three simple reasons: the power of narrative; the nature of our democracy; and because the Progressive Story *is* the American Story.

The Power of Narrative. As Andy Goodman explains in his excellent publication *Storytelling as Best Practice*: "No one ever marched on Washington because of a pie chart." Storytelling is one of the oldest human activities, and as children we first begin to make sense of the world by constructing narratives. Later we may adopt more sophisticated tools to describe our existence: the scientific method, applied statistics and regression analysis, for example. Even still, it is stories that lend meaning to the world around us. All the deep thinking and sound research that underly our analysis of our issues is incredibly important, but it's not enough to change someone's mind: For that, we need a story with a clear moral—the simpler the better—and one filled with values to which they can relate, and which they understand implicitly, perhaps without even knowing why.

"No one ever marched on Washington because of a pie chart."

Andy Goodman

The Nature of Democracy. At the risk of sounding like a civics textbook, political and social change in a democracy relies on convincing more than half of our fellow citizens that we are in the right and our opponents are in the wrong, and getting them to vote accordingly. It is also true that this ideal democracy exists only in the pages of civics textbooks, of course. In the real world, a strongly held minority view or the power of entrenched elites can act as powerful barriers to the will of the majority. Even still, broad support for the issues progressives care about from beyond the base makes overcoming those barriers easier. While the affirmation that comes from only talking to people who agree with us might feel good, its often not enough to achieve our goals. To reach audiences who don't understand and support the causes we're fighting for, we need to appeal to those things that connect us at a deep level: our shared values.

The Progressive Story. It might be difficult today to recognize it, but this country was founded on radically progressive ideas about the perfectibility of human kind, inalienable liberties, and the right of self-government. These ideas were at the core of an Enlightenment movement that was deeply disturbing to the conservative power structure of that era. This isn't the whole story of the American Revolution, of course—the founders' understanding of who was entitled to the rights for which they were fighting was tragically limited—yet time and again throughout our history, people have fought for, and won, those rights by appealing to the founding principles of the country. From the women's suffrage movement at the turn of the last century to the civil rights movement in the 1960s to the gay and lesbian rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s, the American story has been one of progressively extending our understanding of who is entitled to the rights that the Revolution was fought to secure. In this view, the millions of immigrants who took to the streets during the spring of 2006 are but the latest groups to stand up and demand they be included in the society they have helped to build. This story has been going on for more than two hundred years now, and I see no reason to believe it is in danger of ending any time soon.

A More Perfect Union. None of this is to say that America is perfect, of course. As a nation, we have been guilty of immense wrongs, from the "original sin" of slavery and the genocidal warfare waged on Native Americans and the to the rendition and torture of suspected terrorists and worse. It is important to remember that when we're speaking of values and story-telling, perception is at least as important as objective reality, and many Americans believe their history to be a story of progress, of overcoming obstacles through generosity of spirit, community, and hard work. Any effective communications effort must, at the very least, understand how these perceptions will affect the way our messages are received.

Even if you choose not to use any of the recommendations laid out here in your communications work, it is imperative that you understand how these values operate. Your political opponents have been using them for years, to paint their views in a favorable light, and to tear down yours. In order to do so, they have twisted to common meaning of words, and engaged in all manner of double-

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speak. Knowing how they're doing it can at least let you plan an effective defense.

Understanding the progressive elements of the nation's founding principles—and their connection with our deepest aspirations for our society—creates a powerful base on which to build our communications work. Quite simply, it is our responsibility, as communicators for change to articulate the values we hold dear, and to fight for the change those values demand, as we continue the struggle "to form a more perfect union." This struggle is about winning more than the passage of a ballot measure, or even about winning rights for our community. As Ella Baker once said to her young charges in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, "Remember, we are not fighting for the freedom of the Negro alone, but for the freedom of the human spirit, a larger freedom that encompasses all mankind."

What Makes a Story American?

As you might expect in a country that thinks as highly of itself as America does, a great number of people have attempted to define what is unique about America. The following ideas are only examples of the many ways this question has been answered, but they contain some common elements and surprising connections that illustrate broader themes about what we mean when we talk about the American story.

Four Stories. In his book, *Tales of a New America*, former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich identifies four stories he believes constantly recur in our country's history.
One is the story of *the Triumphant Individual*: This is the Horatio Alger story, where a young person with only a nickel in his or her pocket and a good idea eventually hits the big time, achieving great wealth and fame thanks to his or her own hard work and the open nature of our society. It's also the story of Bill Gates, the college dropout who became the richest man in America, and of Lance Armstrong, beating cancer, winning races, and inspiring millions.

A second story revolves around *the Benevolent Community*: This story invokes images of barn-raisings and Main Street in a New England town, but also of big city neighborhoods like Little Italy or Chinatown where immigrant communities gather and prosperity and security are achieved by everyone looking out for everyone else. It is also a story often invoked in the wake of tragedy such as Hurricane Katrina or the Virginia Tech shootings in order to remind ourselves of the kind of communities we aspire to create and to offer solace.

A third story is that of *the Mob at the Gates*, in which our country and our very way of life are threatened by outsiders. This story has often been used in our history to scapegoat and marginalize groups of people, or to make political appeals based on fear and division. Unfortunately, that makes it no less a part of the American story, and understanding how this narrative is constructed can help us combat it. In the nineteenth century, it was successive waves of new immigrants from places like Ireland and Poland that threatened to overwhelm our culture; in the 1950s and 1960s, it was the "Red Menace." Today, it is "the terrorists," of course, but it is also undocumented workers from Mexico that threaten to change the nature of our society.

> **" Remember, we are not fighting for the freedom of the Negro alone, but for the freedom of the human spirit, a larger freedom that encompasses all mankind."**
>
> **Ella Baker**

A fourth story, according to Reich, is that of *the Rot at the Top*, in which secretive elites in business or politics conspire in smoke-filled rooms to enrich themselves at the expense of the rest of us and cut deals to poison our environment and betray our principles. Put simply, this story is about the idea that power corrupts and our need to be ever-vigilant against the powerful; it also helps to account for our endless fascination with celebrity and scandal. It is both the story of Enron and of Jack Abramoff.

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Interestingly, while two of these stories are closely associated with conservative politics (the Triumphant Individual and the Mob at the Gates) and two with progressive causes (the Benevolent Community and the Rot at the Top), these stories are not *exclusively* conservative or progressive. We might associate the Triumphant Individual most closely with conservative ideals, but almost all of us can point to someone in their own experience who succeeded through their own hard work and determination. Likewise, while the Rot at the Top story is familiar to anyone working on economic justice or environmental issues, conservatives often tell the same story about government waste and pork-barrel spending. In short, despite the superficial associations with one ideological perspective, each of these stories can be easily understood by people from across the political spectrum. That makes them powerful tools for progressive communicators hoping to expand support for their issues.

Four Freedoms. In January 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt gave a speech describing the four freedoms he believed "everyone in the world" deserved. These four freedoms were later made into a series of paintings for the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* by Norman Rockwell to explain what it was America was fighting for in the Second World War. The first two of these rights, *Freedom of Speech* and *Freedom of Religion*, are of course drawn directly from the Constitution, while the third and fourth expanded the list of "essential human freedoms" by including *Freedom from Want* and *Freedom from Fear*. Taken together, the four freedoms articulated by Roosevelt provide a uniquely American understanding of a just society and a free people. They are notable for their lack of association with any one political strain in American life, and the equal weight given to both physical security and material well-being, as well as both the civic necessity of free speech and the private, spiritual necessity of freedom of conscience.

Four Traditions. Walter Russell Mead, a conservative-leaning historian of US foreign policy, identifies four traditions in our political history. He believes that these traditions,—which he names, somewhat unsurprisingly, for famous white men who were central to their formation—continue to explain many of the political forces at work in our country today.

The first of these, the *Hamiltonian Tradition*, is named for the first Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton (1755-1804): an immigrant and self-made man, founder of the Bank of the United States, and fierce proponent of the free market. In its simplest form, this is the idea that "What's good for General Motors is good for America," and is today most closely associated with conservative politics.

The second, the *Wilsonian Tradition*, is named for Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), who as President, led the US into a war "to make the world safe for democracy," and championed the creation of the League of Nations. His ideas about exporting American democracy—and our responsibility to spread freedom—were roundly denounced at the time by his political opponents. Still, they found continued expression in the rhetoric and policies of Presidents of both parties throughout the twentieth century, and the current war in Iraq is a textbook example of a Wilsonian enterprise.

Mead identifies a third, *Jeffersonian Tradition*, with our third President, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826). His

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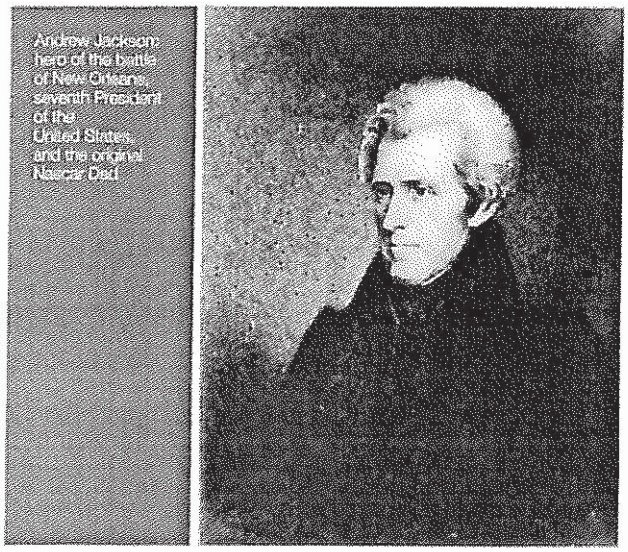

ideas about the dangers of industrialization and of foreign entanglements, and the pressing need to look inward to improve our own society have found adherents of all political persuasions—from the isolationists of the World War II era to labor unions opposed to globalization today.

A fourth, *Jacksonian Tradition*, Mead names for Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) , a populist,war hero, and President nicknamed "Old Hickory" for his toughness. Jacksonians, for Mead, are nationalistic, militaristic, suspicious of political and intellectual elites, and deeply averse to the world outside our borders. When that world outside intrudes, and they feel forced to act abroad, they prefer to do so militarily, and are dogged in their pursuit of victory. Today, we might call them Nascar Dads.

Mead's work is useful because it reminds us that the broad trends we see in our politics today—from debates about corporate power and foreign trade to the proper role of the US abroad—are not new. They are the continuation of debates that have been going on since the founding of the republic. Understanding the history of these traditions can reveal the hidden contexts that shape our public debates. Knowing the history of these traditions also serves as a reminder that political identities are not fixed. Policies associated with one group can be associated with their opponents in the next generation. Andrew Jackson, for example, was the founder of the Democratic Party.

Shared American Values

The first question to ask yourself when you start to think about how to tell your own American stories is: "Does it have American values in it?" The list of values that follows is admittedly subjective and nowhere near exhaustive, but it is based on a lifelong interest in American history, literature, and popular culture. It attempts to make connections between the listed values to show what they mean to Americans, separately and as a system of values. Ideas like courage or hope are, of course, prized by cultures around the world—to speak of them as American values is to try to explain how they play out in our culture, and how they make up part of a coherent whole.

What Makes an American? America, more than most countries, defines itself and the members of its society by reference to a set of shared values. In many ways, they define what it means to be American. While many other nations define their members on the basis of birthplace and blood relations, Americanness is based on a social contract involving an understanding and acceptance of its unique set of democratic values. As sociologist Carl Friedrich once said, "To be a Frenchman is a fact, while to be an American is an ideal." By embracing that ideal, organizations fighting for justice and equality, whether they are working for immigration reform or against felony disenfranchisement can stake their claim to the American story in a way that will make it difficult for their opponents to attack.

Reaffirming our commitment to our shared values can be a powerful tool to promote inclusion of all the individuals and communities that make up the American nation. This isn't to say that using values-laden language will somehow magically erase the barriers between us and win accep-

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tance of marginalized communities, but rather that it will be extremely difficult to win that acceptance without reference to the values that underlie the social contract that binds us together as a nation.

Optimism, Courage. Optimism is the cardinal American value. How could it not be in a country that was founded on Enlightenment ideas about human dignity, the right of self-government and the perfectibility of humanity? Without optimism, a revolutionary war that pitted a group of poorly armed provincials against the most feared army in the world could never have been started. Optimism is intimately connected with the value of courage—not physical courage, though that is also highly valued in America— the kind of moral courage that makes a person believe they have the duty to fight for the better world they believe is possible.

American history is filled with men and women who remained optimistic in the face of daunting odds, rallying their fellow citizens with their quiet courage. Think of Cesar Chavez and the motto of the United Farm Workers—"*¡Sí se puede!*"—and how it has resonated for decades as a rallying cry for those seeking to overcome injustice and secure their rights in this country. Or think of the famous picture of Rosa Parks sitting quietly on a Montgomery bus, and the courage it took to become the public face of that ground-breaking campaign, a campaign that was premised on the belief that segregation could be ended, despite the decades of evidence to the contrary.

What does this mean for progressive communicators hoping to connect their work to American values? Americans respond to positive messages and solutions-oriented approaches. Clearly defining the problem as you see it is important, but always highlighting your vision of a stronger, more just society—and the solutions you believe can get us there—is paramount.

Take the example of a group working for economic justice. Building messages around the poverty-level wages, poor working conditions, and greedy corporations hurting ordinary people will help us connect with others who already share this understanding of the inequalities in our society today. Focusing a message on a future America where everyone has the chance to work hard, get ahead, and achieve their dreams connects with deeply held beliefs of both progressives and conservatives about "the American Dream." It also resonates with America's history as a country that enables and encourages social mobility, where getting ahead is based on talent and hard work rather than accidents of birth. While one could justifiably argue that the belief in a classless society is more myth than reality, such an argument misses the key point—it is our *ideals* to which we are appealing, not the current reality.

Selflessness, Fearlessness. Americans have a deep respect for individuals whose actions are motivated by concern for others, and even more so when their actions involve great risk to themselves. Such individuals embody the kind of moral courage that we aspire to for ourselves.

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The story of Harriet Tubman and her work on the Underground Railroad, leading escaped slaves to freedom in the North, is a good example. Time and again, she risked her own freedom to secure that of others. When asked how it was she could place herself at such risk so many times, she replied, "I can't die but once."

Highlighting the sacrifices made by immigrant parents for the sake of their children, for example, or the commitment shown by a community fighting a polluting corporation, can help to connect the causes progressives are fighting for with broadly held values.

Faith, Hope. The freedom to worship or not, "according to the dictates of our own conscience," in Thomas Jefferson's phrase, is a cornerstone of our American democracy. Still, there can be no denying the powerful role that faith has played in our history, from the references to the Creator in the Declaration of Independence to the soaring imagery of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech. Acknowledging how traditional religious values related to social justice, inclusion, and care for those less fortunate than ourselves connect the values that animate the work of our own organizations can be a powerful way to connect with people whose religious beliefs are based in the same tradition. Those values reveal the hope for a better world that is embodied by that work, providing a corollary to the value Americans place on optimism.

While it is important to acknowledge that faith has often been used by "agents of intolerance" as a force for division and bigotry throughout our history, an honest accounting of its role in our culture must admit more complexity. Billy Graham, for example, with his emphasis on personal responsibility and individual salvation, represents an equally American understanding of faith and hope familiar to many conservatives yet not easily caricatured; he was a consistent opponent of South Africa's Apartheid regime, and paid to bail Dr. King out of jail on several occasions during the 1960s. . So while King and Graham represent two very different understandings of the role of faith in American life, they share a common language of religious values, respected by Americans of all political persuasions. If your organization's work is animated by those same values, don't be afraid to say so.

Community, Self-Reliance. Community, whether it conjures up images of a neighborhood block party or a small town gymnasium filled to the rafters for a high school basketball game, is highly valued—and often a source of great pride—for all kinds of Americans.

To understand the role of community in our history, the example of San Francisco's Chinatown is instructive. Already a thriving neighborhood at the time of the 1906 earthquake, Chinatown was completely destroyed along with the rest of the city. As planning for re-building commenced, the mayor decided that Chinatown should be relocated from its position at the center of the city to its outskirts. The people of Chinatown rejected the proposal, and got to work, constructing new buildings *that they did not own*, rebuilding homes and businesses because of the immense importance they placed on rebuilding their community.

The value of community, of pulling together to make a better life for its members, has long been understood by


Chinatown, San Francisco.

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organizers as important for rallying support among an organization's base. Self-reliance, for many conservatives, would doubtless call to mind images of the rugged individual. By connecting the two values—showing how empowering a community helps to empower individuals—we can connect with two deeply held American values that resonate throughout our history and across our politics.

Toughness, Cool. Americans value toughness, particularly when it's mixed with a measure of stoicism, grace under pressure, and good humor. Cool, of course, is in the eye of the beholder, but people know it when they see it. In America, the birthplace of cool, it most often takes the form of a knowing toughness, laced with sarcasm and dry wit—always easy and graceful, without a care in the world. While our understanding of precisely who is cool changes with the times, from Humphrey Bogart in the 1940s to James Dean and Audrey Hepburn in the 1950s, Bruce Lee in the 1970s and Eddie Murphy in the 1980s to Andre 3000 and Big Boi today, cool itself is eternal. If you have someone on your side who has it, by all means—use it! Likewise, if your opponents are attempting to don the mantle of cool, and you know they're anything but, call them on it. There's nothing worse than trying to look cool when you're not.

Fairness, Hard Work. The value Americans place on hard work is central to our identity and deeply ingrained in our collective conscious. The connection with fairness ("work hard, get ahead," or "an honest day's wages") is a major part of many economic justice messages. These concepts are embodied in the life story of a woman such as Dolores Huerta, who has spent her entire life fighting for decent working conditions for migrant farm-workers and at the age of seventy five still puts in a full work week at her foundation. It's important to remember that it is not only fairness that we strive for when we organize to win better wages or working conditions—hard work itself is valued in this country because it speaks to the moral uprightness of those who do it. Understanding how work imparts dignity to the worker and reminding people of that fact can be extremely helpful in forging the personal connections through our communications efforts that will help to change minds and win allies.

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The Metaphor Project

American Metaphor. Metaphor is a powerful tool of storytelling. It connects what is new about the story we are telling to specific words and phrases that evoke American ideas so familiar they are almost clichés. That familiarity is the core of their appeal for communicators because they can help us to achieve the kind of echo effect that we are trying to achieve. Among the most kinds of metaphor in our country are those related to sports (play by the rules, be a team player) business (the bottom line, be in the red) and war (take the high ground, friendly fire).

For more on metaphor and its application to communications work, visit the **Metaphor Project** (www.metaphorproject.org), an organization that collects and analyzes the sources of American metaphor, as well helping with progressive framing in general.

Entrepreneurship, Generosity. For better and for worse, America is a deeply capitalist society, and as such, it values entrepreneurship highly. Whether it's Bill Gates on the cover of another business magazine, or Oprah Winfrey on the cover of her own magazine (she is, each and every month), Americans can become famous for their business acumen and sheer wealth, and many have. Americans also value generosity, both because it appeals to their sense of fairness and because it implies success and financial well-being. Using language that emphasizes the entrepreneurial nature of our work—empowering individuals and communities to succeed, grow, and prosper—can help place that work in a context that many Americans easily understand and naturally tend to support. Highlighting the generosity of members of our community encourages respect for them and encourages those with even greater resources to support our work.

Discipline, Excellence. Americans' respect for discipline is deeply connected with ideas about honor and self-restraint, and also with respect for practice, hard work, and the excellence we believe those traits to engender.

When Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play major league baseball, he faced an entire season's worth of the most terrible racism and ignorant hatred imaginable, from people in the stands, from his opponents, and even from his own teammates. Yet Robinson never once fought back, never lost control of himself, because he realized that to do so would be to lose sight of his ultimate goal: seeing the majors completely integrated. At the same time, if Jackie Robinson had been merely an average third baseman, or a so-so hitter, the trail he was blazing would have been immeasurably more difficult. Just as much as his discipline, his greatness helped him win over the public and achieve his goals—if there's one thing America likes more than a hardworking underdog, it's a hardworking underdog who *wins*.

Telling stories that focus on the discipline shown by hard-working immigrant mothers and father can help engender respect for their struggles. While there is a real danger of reinforcing stereotypes about "deserving" and "undeserving" members of the society we care about, highlighting the core American values animating our stories can be of immense value in convincing our fellow Americans of the justness of our cause.

Liberty, Justice. These twin values of liberty and justice are intimately connected, and not just by virtue of their recitation at the end of the Pledge of Allegiance. *Liberty*, of course, refers to the set of rights and responsibilities a free people grant to, and require of, themselves and *Justice*, the essential requirement for fairness in a

Superman: Still willing to fight for truth, justice, and other pro-drivative values.

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The Opportunity Agenda

The Land of Opportunity. Opportunity— the idea that everyone should have a shot at achieving his or her potential— is central to what we know as the American Dream. Generations of immigrants have come to this country, driven by the belief that they can achieve success by working hard, because ours is a country where merit matters more than who your parents were. Where a conservative would take such a statement at face value, a progressive would describe it as a principle--a goal we strive toward but have not yet achieved. Americans already overwhelmingly believe in the idea of opportunity. The challenge for progressive communicators is to make clear that the choices we make about public policy have a direct effect on whether there is true opportunity in this country, or whether "the land of opportunity" is nothing but myth-making and empty rhetoric.

In the spring of 2006, **The Opportunity Agenda**, working with their partners at The SPIN Project, published American Opportunity: A Communications Toolkit, which laid out their arguments for adoption of the Opportunity Frame among grassroots nonprofit organizations, and supplied tools to help them do so.

For more information on The Opportunity Agenda and the Opportunity Frame, including its application to a number of issues, please visit their website (http://www.opportunityagenda.org), and download a copy of American Opportunity: A Communications Toolkit.

nation that is committed to the rule of law and to protect that hard-won liberty. Both liberty and justice contain within their meaning the understanding that they must apply equally to every American if they are to have any meaning at all.

It is that universality that is the key to understanding a central truth about the progressive character of American democracy: where today's conservatives speak almost exclusively of defending individuals' freedoms, progressive communicators should focus on those same individual freedoms as they define the kind of society in which we live, and in which we wish to live. Placing the freedoms we continue to struggle for in that broader context of the rights and responsibilities that define our society is both good communications practice (in that it "frames" the issue so that it is broadly applicable to more peoples' lives) and an authentic expression of a progressive concern that extends beyond the individual to the nature of our society. When progressive organizations fight for liberty they are fighting not for the liberty of one person, or even one group of people, but for the liberty of everyone in our society. It is this understanding of liberty, and its importance, that would have been familiar to the founders of our republic.

Justice, of course, is a concept with which progressive communicators will be intimately familiar. So powerful is the belief in the importance of justice that progressives have defined an increasing number of the issues they care passionately about by using it as part of the definition of their work: environmental justice, racial justice, media justice, and a half-dozen different other varieties of justice. Yet justice is a concept that draws its meaning from its universality; sub-dividing it can only subtract from its power. It is that universality that connects the struggles of the Civil Rights era to a fight to stop a polluting corporation from endangering the health of a poor community, and to efforts to ensure that all of our citizens have equal access to the media. Emphasizing that it is *justice*, writ large, for which we fight, can be a powerful aid to our communications efforts, and one that anyone who's ever read a *Superman* comic-book can understand.

A Final Story

The gentleman in the picture on the next page lived a very difficult life. As a child, his mother, suffering from a degenerative neurological disease, burned down the family home, tried to kill his father, and was committed to a mental institution. He came of age during the Great Depression, making his living as an itinerant sign painter before discovering that he could make more money singing in beer halls. He first achieved fame as a radio cow-

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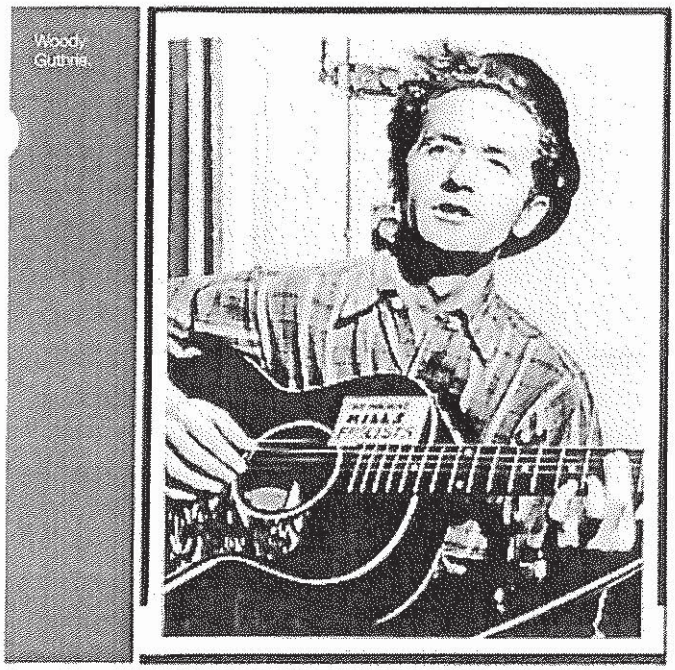

boy in
Los Angeles, and then as a folk musician, but found himself blacklisted for his association with the Communist Party. In the prime of his life, he was diagnosed with the same condition that had killed his mother, and spent the last twenty years of his life in a state hospital, unknown and unvisited, even by many of the folk singers who had begun to rediscover his music.

None of this, of course, is what we remember about Woody Guthrie. We remember him for his immense compassion for the little guy, his joyful humor, his unwavering belief in the fight for justice, and for a song he wrote that every school child knows: *This Land is Your Land.*

This land *is* your land, with all of its greatness, all of its faults. As communicators for social change, and more importantly, as Americans, it is our responsibility to articulate our vision for our nation, to define what it is that is working, and what needs changing. In telling our stories, we should not be afraid of remembering what has gone before, or complacent about what is yet to be. We have a responsibility to our fellow Americans, and to ourselves, to make our stories heard.

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