Yuval Levin, in his new book *A Time to Build*, writes about the crucial role the institutions of civil society play in molding Americans into productive participants in a self-governing republic. He reminds us that we are not radical individuals, but dependent from our earliest days upon family, civic groups, and other guiding institutions that shape our life, liberty, and identity. Alas, private institutions—ranging from universities to religion to professions—are now fading in their ability to reinforce individuals in constructive ways, and have lost the trust of the American people.

Levin's definition of “institution” is broad, ranging from politics to professions to universities to social media to family to religions. He gives a compelling critique of these institutions, arguing their purpose is no longer formative but performative. They were once molds of their members’ personal character; now they are platforms for their leaders’ personal brands.

Levin's chapter on meritocracy is a must-read. Brilliant, incisive, countereven, it highlights a consequence of our relentless focus on academic achievement: students at elite institutions have a powerful feeling of entitlement due to their academic success. That sense undermines institutions by encouraging leadership behavior that puts celebrity ahead of mission.

Levin is not simply a chronicler of decline. In the latter part of his book he calls on us to recommit to our institutions. It has taken centuries to build them, and they have done much good. Do we really think our society would be better off if we simply burned them to the ground? Levin lays out potential paths to renewal, particularly focusing on how elites can exercise authority more effectively within our institutions.

*A Time to Build* is what one has come to expect from Levin: a well-written, occasionally provocative, always thoughtful narrative told from the perspective of a traditional conservative commentator who has spent his career writing for and speaking with the political class in Washington, D.C. That perspective, however, is also the weakness of his book.

We are in the midst of a great political realignment such as occurs only every hundred years or so in America. When such a realignment occurs, institutions necessarily go through a process of creative destruction. Some are humbled or die. New ones arise from nothing to better serve societal needs.

This creative destruction is clearly visible in our current realignment, the Populist Reformation. Levin is deeply critical of today’s populist backlash against institutions. He calls this rebellion “fundamentally antinomian, mistrustful of authority, and cynical.”

That exposes Levin’s deep misunderstanding of today’s populism. It is not antinomian, it just wants laws to be made by legislatures, not executives, judges, or (worst of all) unaccountable bureaucrats. It is not mistrustful of all authority, just those authorities that have made themselves unaccountable to the very laws and bylaws they wield against others.

And it is not fundamentally cynical, just distrustful of elites with overgrown senses of entitlement and superiority.

Levin also misunderstands the culture war to which he frequently refers. He views the culture war as an epic struggle between partisans of the Left and Right that has knocked valuable institutions off the rails. Journalism, politics, academia, professional societies, religions: these institutions and others have been “deformed…into the contours of the broader culture war” to their detriment, and ours.

But institutions are not innocent bystanders in this war. They are the warriors. It is political parties, the media, corporations, and universities that have created, expanded, and sustained the culture war against tradition, evolved practice, received wisdom, and common sense. Today's culture war is less a struggle between Left and Right than a war of Top against Bottom.

The last century saw a dramatic centralization of power in the United States. In 1910, 60 percent of government spending was local; a hundred years later that had fallen to 25 percent. The federal share of government spending doubled from 30 to 60 percent. Elites also centralized and homogenized businesses, nonprofits, religious groups, civic organizations, and other entities that previously had encapsulated a broad range of practices and points of view, and deep everyday experience.

It is this centralization of power and its intolerance for multiple narratives that is the driver of today’s extreme polarization. Centralization turns every conflict into a winner-take-all death match. Instead of allowing live-and-let-live variety across a wide ecosystem of values and practice, every conflict requires all participants to pick a side: you’re with me or against me. Compromise becomes untenable, and we are left with a combination of gridlocked politics and frenzied Twitter mobs.

Neither political party can resist the temptations of power. Examples abound of both Left and Right imposing their will on local communities and dissident viewpoints. Experience shows that
everyone’s in favor of local control until they’re in control.

The more centralized the decision-making, the greater the battle. In the biggest melees of the culture war—abortion and gay marriage—a handful of judges intervened in ongoing, messy, deliberative processes and imposed uniform, universal outcomes on all communities. Debate on matters at the very heart of our most important institutions—marriage and family—was squelched. The resulting conflicts may appear to be clashes between Left and Right when viewed from the Beltway, but in Flyover Country they feel like unelected Americans at the Top imposing their will on folks at the Middle and Bottom, on topics with deep moral and practical dimensions.

Reframing the culture war as a struggle between Top and Bottom—between large, centralized, monocultured institutions and small, local, varied ones—exposes Levin’s errors about populists and institutions. Populists are not anti-institutional; they simply believe some institutions are more important than others. They want to give priority to small institutions like marriage, family, neighborhood groups, churches, and family businesses.

Populists have come to realize that large institutions—federal and state bureaucracies, big corporations, mega-media, national professional associations, universities—are a mortal threat to the small institutions they know and love, the institutions that shaped us, the institutions that are woven into our identity. And they will strike back at large institutions to protect the small ones.

Donald Trump was not the cause of this; he was simply the weapon at hand when the battle was joined.

Levin focuses on social media as an anti-institutional force. By connecting people directly and giving them the freedom to communicate in new ways, it has disrupted, and in some cases, destroyed large narrative-generating institutions like journalism, publishing companies, Hollywood, academia, think tanks, and so on. Broadly, Internet transactions have upended retail, transportation, and other sectors of American society.

When the Information Revolution began toward the end of the twentieth century, there was hope it would allow small players to compete with big ones. Rather than rely upon an editor in New York to decide what you should know, you could read Blogger, Drudge, or Wikipedia. If you wanted to buy organic toothpaste or hemp sandals, you could find a small merchant and order online.

Fast forward to today and the feel is very different. We now have a handful of huge companies and centralized states that dominate the Internet. Authoritarian countries like China and Russia have throttled the flow of information within, and sometimes outside, their borders. In important information industries, dominant mega-companies exercise near monopolies. What is particularly scary about these new forces, Levin suggests, is that they “plainly encourage the vices most dangerous to a free society.” Pro-social institutions soften humanity’s worst instincts, and shape us in more virtuous ways. Today’s powerful new Internet institutions are doing little of that.

The institutions best positioned to protect us against the destructive influences of new information technology happen to be the smallest ones—family, faith groups, community organizations, and social and business entrepreneurs who create healthy alternatives. Alas, these vital institutions are under assault from big, elite institutions that, rightly, should be subordinate to them: the googleplex, mass media, academia, big business, and the state.

The defeat of small and local by large and centralized institutions annihilates an invaluable principle Americans have relied upon from our beginning—the principle of subsidiarity. That is the idea that decisions should be made as close to the people as possible. The American Revolution celebrated subsidiarity. The Progressive movement extended it into new venues. And subsidiarity animates today’s Populist Reformation.

Subsidiarity is a principle that is missing from Levin’s call for a recommitment to institutions. If we apply it in the future as we should, institutions that are large and condescending will shrivel. Elites occupying those institutions might view that as decay, but to the rest of us it will look like a restoration of balance between Top and Bottom.

Levin is right that it is time to recommit to institutions that support and shape individual character, and that this will restore national health. But the manipulating institutions that have concentrated power, wealth, and social influence among a frightfully thin slice of American elites over recent decades we can do without. It is our foundational institutions—family, faith, neighborhood, charities, small enterprises, voluntary associations—that need bolstering.

Philanthropy—at its best—is medicine for what ails our society. And as with physicians, the first rule of philanthropists should be “Do no harm.” At a time when many large institutions are undermining our self-governing republic, protecting and reinforcing those institutions will do more harm than good.

We need a reformation, and philanthropists can and should fuel it. They must do so by engaging at the local level with social startups rather than chasing the twin mirages of large “scale” and global “impact.”

Intimate, person-to-person, local-oriented philanthropy is harder than just writing a check to an established high-profile institution. But that is the work that desperately needs to be done. At a time when many large-scale institutions are broken beyond repair, philanthropists should move their investments to new places, think small and local, take risks, salvage the best old institutions, and build fresh ones that better address the problems bedeviling the massive middle of our society, rather than the luxury causes of our ruling class.

It is indeed a time to build.

From the ground up.

Leo Linbeck III is CEO of Aquinas, a family-owned construction and real-estate company in Houston that tithes to charitable causes from its annual net income. He is also a lecturer at the Stanford business school, and a founder of nonprofits like the education-reform group Families Empowered, and the Center for Opportunity Urbanism.
A few years ago Philanthropy told the story of Robert Wilson, an atheistic Wall Street financier who never planned to give money to education. Or to the Catholic church. But when Wilson read a fundraising letter touting the low cost per student and superior results of parochial schools, he decided that “seeing these schools disappear would be intolerable.” So he gave the Catholic schools of New York City $22.5 million and created a partnership to help them find additional means of support. It was one of life’s delightful ironies: one of the largest supporters of Catholic schooling didn’t believe in God.

In The Irony of Modern Catholic History, scholar George Weigel dives headlong into many similar paradoxes, tracking how a church resistant to modernity has become integral to the healthy functioning of modern societies. He argues: 1) The Catholic church is an indispensable pillar of civil society; 2) nations rise and fall depending on the strength of their civil societies; and 3) a person doesn’t have to be a believing Catholic to see the value of the church’s teachings and good works. Robert Wilson, case in point.

It took the Catholic church some time to find its place within modern society. In the early nineteenth century, church leaders were obsessed with their eroding political power. In 1870 Pope Pius IX lost all his remaining Papal States territory and was left with only the 110 acres we know as the Vatican. Though Pius couldn’t imagine the church thriving without old-fashioned monarchical power, his successors slowly learned that the church actually gained strength the more she shifted toward explaining her teachings in public dialogue, rather than imposing them as law. Abandoning the distractions of power politics made it easier to focus on the core mission of evangelizing. And it gave the church standing to become an arbiter of struggles between nations and political platforms—as in John Paul II’s eloquent arguments for the superiority of individual liberty to Communist tyranny, which helped bring down the Soviet Empire.

The modern world began with aspirations for a life free of kings and overbearing clergy. By the mid-twentieth century, though, the greatest threats to freedom came not from throne or altar but from newfangled rulers like Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, who claimed to have conquered outdated religions and brought science to bear on politics. As Weigel summarizes, John Paul II’s response was that totalitarian rulers were doomed to fail because they tried to manipulate and even eradicate the “fundamental human associations and mediating institutions of civil society.”

Communism was the extreme case, but less manipulative regimes that still undermined the organic human structures of civil society could also harm citizens. “All modern states,” warns Weigel, have a tendency “to extend the reach of their power.” That’s why John Paul II admonished the “Free World” not to erode the actions of civil society by creating government welfare programs that lead “to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving.” If we want to help our fellow citizens, urged the Pope, we must recognize that “needs are best understood and satisfied by people who are closest to them and who act as neighbors.” This concept of subsidiarity is a brake on government centralization and has deeply shaped American approaches to social problem-solving.

Other Catholic teachings also reinforce individual freedom and independence. It is virtuous habits of mind and heart that make “the machinery of democracy and the free economy work,” as Weigel puts it. These essential personal disciplines, he notes, are formed in civil society and “primordially in the family, which John Paul dubbed the first school of freedom: the community in which little tyrants, small children for whom willfulness is everything, begin to grow into mature men and women who can live in community with those who are different.”

This understanding of freedom’s dependence on vibrant civil society has been underscored by recent history and empirical research. As Ryan Streeter summarized in his Philanthropy review of the new book Alienated America, “when attachment to religious precepts erodes...communities become less healthy, people become unhappier, and economic viability declines.” Two centuries ago, reformers confidently believed that shaking off religious claims would solve all human problems. Today, many citizens doubt the existence of any enduring truth whatsoever, and feel lost in a meaningless universe. Lost people, it turns out, create lost communities.

As pundits and politicians bemoan the weakening of civil society, George Weigel’s book can help us respond. The church is a pillar of civil society, and needs to be braced and maintained. Not just because it supports good works like adoption, hospital care, schooling for the poor, and so forth. But because the central teachings of the church—that humans have a meaningful place and high responsibilities within a loving universe—are an essential component of individual dignity and freedom.
Panning Some Gold Out of Brown
Too much of good things
By Fred Smith

Early on in Dare to Lead, pop counselor and pep talker Brené Brown discusses her work with Alcoholics Anonymous. She notes that the program’s slogans, like “One day at a time” and “You’re only as sick as your secrets,” seem simplistic—yet all are true. “It does look like a Saturday Night Live skit where there are ten posters hanging in a row on a wood-paneled wall in a church basement, but they are the damn truth, and if you live by them they will rock your world.”

My verdict on Brown’s book would be something very similar to that. Her slogans, phrases, memes, and acronyms pile one atop another to the point where it’s sometimes difficult to know if this is the product of voracious notetaking at a hotel seminar, or a book written specifically to be turned into a future seminar. Catchy memory cues and terms like “chandeliering,” “bouncing hurt,” “gasp and awe,” or “square squad” are effective until you feel overwhelmed by their very catchiness. It’s hard to keep up with the pace. It soon becomes too much of a good thing. That said, what is Brown’s good thing? And how might her truths be applied to philanthropy?

The hardest trust-building comes when the personal values of each participant are different. If there is to be any chance of meeting in the middle, you must demonstrate the utility of your values, not just preach them. “The reason we roll our eyes when people start talking about values is that everyone talks a big values game but very few people actually practice one.... If you are not going to take the time to translate values from ideas to behavior...it’s better not to profess any values at all. They become a joke. A cat poster. Total BS.”

Rob Martin, author of When Money Goes On Mission, tells of a grant from a foundation earmarked for an elevator during a building renovation. Foundation staff stopped by to check on the progress, and to their surprise and disappointment discovered the funds had been used for another project. The promised elevator was nothing more than an empty shaft. This could have ended badly for both parties, but instead the funder turned it into an exercise in leadership. They initiated the hard conversation, but it wasn’t one of blame. A central value of the foundation was respect for the grantee, so the leaders talked about trust. Specifically, the importance of meeting promises if there was to be a continuing relationship. They made a plan with the grantee on how to recover from the failure without misery or shame.

That is not easy. It takes years of practice. Many foundations would have responded less sympathetically. As a result, grantees dread to report disappointments. Many avoid acknowledging failures, or shift blame, or glibly chalk up collapses as “learning experiences.” Nothing is more likely to unravel a relationship.

When I ran The Gathering as a convocation of like-minded donors, we made great effort to build up trusting relationships. And when we asked people what they found valuable in their association with our community, trust was uppermost on the list. When real trust exists, people have the freedom to disagree without rancor. They go beyond sharing successes and speak honestly about disappointments as well, in the hope of helping someone else profit from their shortfall. When people are in a place that is safe but not sterile, they find their thinking stretched in positive ways.

Trust cannot be artificial. And it cannot be force-fed. I learned that trust first has to be built up within the board and staff of an organization. Then it can work its way down into the wider relationships of the group.

I don’t know of a definitive handbook for encouraging vulnerability and building trust in an enterprise. But Brown’s book has some useful guidance on this important topic. If you can wade through the onslaught of catchy phrases, you’ll find there are helpful guidelines here. Donors who are able to translate her precepts into genuine trust will find that their gifts to people have extra power to lift and propel.

Fred Smith founded The Gathering and served as president for 34 years.

Think small and local, and build fresh institutions that better address the problems bedeviling the middle of our society, rather than the luxury causes of our ruling classes. - Leo Linbeck