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An Appalachian Renaissance

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by [Mary Trigiani](#)

Renaissance is rebirth. Every era of human history labeled as a renaissance shares common hallmarks: essential transition, intellectual flowering, and a questioning of the status quo. The renaissance of most notoriety, from roughly the 14th century through the 17th, gave light to rational thinking grounded in an appreciation of the past while not literally of it. As a result of a rationality enriched by art and cultural advances, a world of possibility was born. The thoughtful acknowledgement of the reality of situations and the development of actionable strategies meant more citizens had the opportunity to prosper.

That renaissance emerged out of necessity as well. A devastating plague left a smaller population who had to be practical and curious in order to survive. They had to form communities and collaborate to form courses of action. While intellectual pursuits might not have been the purview of all citizens of the time, they had to sharpen practical intellect and technical ability. Perhaps most fascinating, on each community's level, they had to perfect and develop their own personas. When aggregated, their specialties and competitive advantages lifted a world. They were stewards of their time and of future generations.

We are called to stewardship today, in our own region. American stewardship. The concept of only a few pulling the strings and bringing others to the table when convenient – a clearly outdated interpretation of power and influence – must give way to the fulfillment of a view of representation and input embodied in the birth of this nation. This is where our region can enliven its legacy of independent thought and strength – speaking truth to power while standing ready to shake hands and focus on what we have in common – not judging one another around factors that have little or nothing to do with the economic emergency we share.

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Our leaders must deliver to our evolving legacy of participation and contribution. In due course, all will discover that daylighting their activities will deliver professional satisfaction through a compelling transparency, not back-room power. With our leaders, in every sector, we must recognize that each other's strengths and efforts would be exponentially more effective if we combine resources, climb over the disagreements, and muscle through them. Out in the open.

Here is what it means to think as stewards of an actual shared vision. Think about a hypothetical company, whose divisions are not acting under one purpose. The division managers meet fairly frequently, nod their heads in agreement to proposals for improving the company's top line and customer traction, yet leave the gatherings unable or unwilling to align with the proposals or calls to action. Redundancies and duplication of effort are not the concern of the division heads. They are comfortable in their jobs, secure in their employment. These are their facts of work life because they are not held accountable for putting their resources to the mission, performing to the strategy, or explaining what they are doing. As long as they spend no more money than they have, they have performed.

This is the antithesis of stewardship. In good economic times, maybe a company can survive on legacy customer relationships, with excess budget devoted to feel-good programs without clear performance measures. Beyond not working in a challenging economy, however, this mindset also precludes the acknowledgement that business practices must evolve. And this mindset is selfish. It delivers a kind of protectionism to certain classes of friends and family. Which leads to perhaps the most troubling consequence of all: leaders who might otherwise emerge in a healthy economy have no home in an ecosystem dominated by those who fear change and growth. Now extrapolate that hypothetical company into our very real region and you see what's at stake.

An Appalachian Renaissance is within our grasp, through true stewardship. Let's think big. Let's create a regional master plan that makes way for some big concepts. Examples include the following: Our region becomes a hotbed for rejuvenating the American middle class. Our region is the place to live, whatever one's life stage, because the cost of living combined with quality of life, arts, and access to natural resources are topnotch. Our region's consortium of education institutions [pre-school through higher education] offers a solid foundation for entrepreneurs and startups, from ideas, through training, to incubation and launch. Our region is industrial, with established companies ready to help newcomers plant here and introduce new career paths.

Beyond a solid ground of our track record of working and producing, we believe in self-reliance and fairness. Our desire to live in communities and support one another compensates greatly for the moments of fatalism that dominate some dark corners of the regional mindset – all of which come from a compulsion to hoard turf, an irrational fear of arrogance, and a reluctance to honor our humanity.

Now is not the time, out of trepidation, to retreat and reject. It is our time, our opportunity and our duty to create a new experience for all who choose to live in this remarkable place.

This is the final of a three-part editorial by Mary Trigiani, a veteran senior executive who most recently served in the banking industry.

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