John W. Gardner (1912-2002)

Who today in American society feels comfortable discussing such virtues as grace, selflessness, decency and optimism? What can we use as a touchstone for our best instincts of service and civility? Where, outside of the rare sports legend, is the beloved public figure who represents the best in us?

We can be glad that the last is not a rhetorical question. The answer is an ageless 89-year-old gentleman named John Gardner. Mr. Gardner combines the wisdom of a great chief like Black Elk with the optimism of a college student setting out to make a difference. So loved and so admired is Mr. Gardner that producing a "balanced" profile is an all but impossible task. You would look long and hard before finding someone who would say something even mildly critical about him.

The easy way to achieve such stature is taking the 49ers to the Super Bowl three or four times. Mr. Gardner achieved it the hard way. He was president of the Carnegie Foundation. He ran the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. He founded Common Cause. He founded Independent Sector. He established the White House Fellows program. He is Consulting Professor at the School of Education at Stanford. He served under six U.S. presidents. He chaired, taught, led, inspired, wrote, mentored, thought, acted. The list of his public service accomplishments is pages long.

It is not difficult to tell what Mr. Gardner has done. It is more daunting to describe how he does it. In Mr. Gardner, you experience the best kind of citizen and leader--optimistic, positive, curious, open. He has a disposition as sunny as a June day in his hometown of Beverly Hills. He tells funny and adoring stories about his mother. He tells stories about everything as a matter of fact, to illuminate his beliefs about being of service, working politically for sound outcomes and living a meaningful life. All of which may be one and the same for him.

There is a magic about Mr. Gardner. It’s not the glaring charisma of JFK or the balletic brilliance of Bill Clinton. It is subtle, but it is powerful. No matter how good you feel when you are on your way to meet him, you are going to feel better when you leave. For instance, one day, two leaders of City Year, a youth service program, went to have lunch with Mr. Gardner in Palo Alto. He was their hero, their role model; they were thrilled to find him wearing his trademark seersucker jacket. They had come to visit the oracle. Most people feel this way when they are about to meet him for the first time.

But delivering the word from Apollo is not what Mr. Gardner is about. He wanted to hear what was happening with City Year. He wanted to learn from what they were doing. Who were the youth who were volunteering? What corporations were supporting the program? How were corporate leaders intersecting with civic leaders? Were partnerships starting to form? The City Year leaders soon lost the uncomfortable if heady sense that they were talking to John Gardner. Instead, they found themselves having a spirited conversation with someone who cared deeply about their work. Who, above all else, cared about making the system work. Coming from that perspective, Mr. Gardner said things that made them view even our legislative process with fresh eyes.

Someone happened to remark that Wilbur Mills, the legendary chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, was the classic example of an "inside the Beltway" power broker. "Mills was always referred to as 'the autocratic chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee,'" Mr. Gardner said quietly. "In fact, he was the least autocratic chairman ever. Mills knew exactly what every member of his committee wanted and made sure there was something for each of them in every bill. He knew the powers in the House and was always taking legislation to them, testing it, getting their input, then going back and refining it. Legislation he sponsored passed by overwhelming majorities because he never brought a bill to the floor until he was absolutely ready." Thoughtful nods all around the table. This was a story that was going to be told and re-told. An invaluable lesson that could come only from an elder statesman.

But the quintessential Gardner moment came near the end, when someone described a conversation with Roger
Tory Peterson, the great ornithologist. When asked why he was so optimistic about the environment, Peterson had replied, "Because pessimism has no future!" Mr. Gardner threw his head back and clapped his hands. "That is absolutely delightful," he said. "That is the spirit that built this country. That is the spirit we've got to figure out how to retain."

Mr. Gardner is helping us to figure out how. For almost six decades, he has stayed the course of enlightened citizenship and leadership—questioning but not cynical, certain but not arrogant, steady but not rigid, conservative and liberal, both in the very best sense. His eternally optimistic spirit lives in everything from civil rights laws implemented during his tenure at HEW to Common Cause and the John Gardner Fellowship for Public Service. He makes us better as a people. There is no greater legacy than that.