

Book Review

The Time of Our Lives—A Conversation About America

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Tom Brokaw's book is a focus on today's problems and challenges that face students, families, veterans, workers, and persons of all business. He emphasizes the importance of citizens taking the social responsibility of preparing a future for their children and grandchildren who deserve the same opportunities as he and his readers had in their youth. He asks that Americans re-enlist as citizens, work together to think of bold and innovative ideas, and be proactive in implementing solutions. Brokaw supports his opinions with actual stories of individuals who are actively involved in making America a better place.

“What has happened to us?” “Have we lost our way? “Will our children and grandchildren have better lives than us?”(pp. ix- x). Hearing these dispirited questions throughout the country, Brokaw said it was time for a conversation about the problems facing Americans and there is a dire need to implement bold and proactive solutions to address the issues.

Brokaw's first strength is demonstrated through his discussion on education. With more than 40 million Americans being illiterate, more than 10 percent of college students taking remedial reading, and American teens ranking 25th in math, 14th in reading, and 17th in science among 34 countries, he emphasizes education reform is a national imperative.

Brokaw believes a partial solution to enhance student education performance is the implementation of public-private partnerships whose focus is to invest funds designed to improve student learning. He supports this solution by noting several partnerships that have made significant contributions. Jim Barksdale, former CEO of Netscape, funded Barksdale Reading Institute that improved teaching strategies in Mississippi schools. Philanthropist Tom Cousins transformed a drug-infested neighborhood to one with a modern charter school where students rose to score above the state's academic standards. Principal Anthony Smith led an inner-city school out of a state of emergency. He partnered with Jack Cassidy, CEO of Cincinnati Bell, and together they promoted the revitalization of students to a higher academic level. Geoffrey Canada, President of the Harlem Children's Zone, was effective in supervising 100s of educational programs that strengthened youngsters in succeeding beyond their neighborhoods.

Brokaw also addresses the high education costs, particularly in state colleges. He explains these institutions often duplicate their resources, resulting in inefficient use of goods and services. He logically argues that state budgets and the population could be better served by consolidating administrative costs and higher education resources on a regional rather than state-by-state basis” (p. 62).

Another aspect of education Brokaw discussed in much detail is the community college. He notes they are not only affordable but offer a fundamental curriculum from which students can gain a well-

grounded education. He emphasizes that many community colleges are working with modern manufacturers who assist in designing curricula based on sophisticated technical skills training and problem-solving coursework. This form of technical education effectively prepares qualified students to become potential employee candidates for high-powered manufacturer positions. To illustrate a quality example, Brokaw showcases Gateway Community and Technical College and the highly technical manufacturing plant--MAG Industrial Automation Systems, as one of the successful partnerships between education and manufacturing.

Another strength of Brokaw's book is his summation of the economic woes among Americans that was acquired through research and interviews. He provides examples of how many individuals have lived beyond their means—buying large homes and new cars, taking long weekend vacations, and filling their homes with expensive gadgetry. He points to the collision between the 2008 Recession and (1) Americans' spending frenzy, (2) the nine million who lost their jobs, and (3) banks that repossessed more than 1 million homes. Brokaw shares stories of typical families, including those of his daughters, who realize they must reduce expenses and live with fewer comforts. In the words of a couple who lost most everything, "We've learned a very hard lesson. We as a nation were living much too hard, much too big. We [must] get back to basics" (p. 117).

Another of Brokaw's strengths is illustrated through his detailed overview of health care costs. He warns the "American middle class ... will be in a constant state of financial stress and anxiety" (p. 218) if there is no reform. He repeats a common theme that states must balance their budgets, refrain from irresponsible spending, and implement public-private partnerships. One of the partnerships Brokaw conveys is an Australian company and a Spanish company who partnered with Indiana to operate a toll road stretching over 157 miles into the Chicago area. This teamwork allowed the state a gain of \$3 billion over a 75-year life span. Similar projects, he notes, are underway in Colorado, Virginia, and Texas, all of whose gains can support health care expenditures.

Brokaw's strength of writing in reference to the American war veterans and their families is also well demonstrated candidly and compassionately. He writes, "It is fundamentally unfair to expect a small percentage of our population, drawn largely from the middle and working class or poor, to carry the burden and pay the price of fighting wars that are always initiated in the 'national interest'" (p. 130). His solution is that Americans enlist to help the veterans. He relays a story of Corey Briest, a son and a husband with two children from Brokaw's hometown of Yankton, South Dakota. When a warrior in Baghdad, Corey had been hit by an IED, leaving him with Traumatic Brain Injury. His wife was able to find a private facility in Southern California that provided the needed therapy and rehabilitation for him. Once he was released, South Dakota building contractors raised money that they used to build a new home for Corey and his family. The home contained accommodations, including an elevator and handrails which helped with his mobility. Brokaw also noted that many of Corey's buddies volunteered to take him to Emergency Management Training sessions where he had been an employee prior to his service in Iraq. Brokaw says Corey is making good progress.

Brokaw shares another interesting example in the person of Lieutenant Greitens, a Navy Seal, an honors student at Duke University, and a PHD at Oxford University, who established a veterans program called The Mission Continues, a 501(c)(3) with his friend Kenneth Harris. It is a 14-week fellowship program in which wounded veterans volunteer to serve in charitable organizations and other areas of need. These individuals, many of whom feel they can never contribute to the good of society, receive cost of living expenses and a reason to continue their life. By 2010, there were more than 400 veterans who had experienced the program.

Due to the program, a 14-year veteran named Phillip Sturgeon who had suffered from post traumatic stress disorder found new value in life. Brokaw skillfully brings the reader very close to the story as he continued to write that Sturgeon trained a Labrador puppy to be a service dog to assist those in wheelchairs. He had named the pup "L.T." for "Lieutenant." He said, "L.T. gives me purpose. He helps me deal with anxiety every day" (p. 167)...It gives "me something to look forward to and it was a huge relief because it brought my whole family back together" (p. 168). A few days later, Brokaw heard that Sturgeon was going blind and would no longer be able to train dogs. Brokaw thought, "My God, ...how

much does one family have to go through? How many Phil Sturgeons are out there, in small towns, second- or third-generation military vets so disabled?" (p. 168).

In the final chapter, Brokaw relates the "September of [His] Years", to Frank Sinatra's "It Was a Very Good Year":

*But now the days grow short;
I'm in the autumn of the year
And now I think of my life as vintage wine,
From fine old kegs,
From the brim to the dregs,
And it poured sweet and clear.
It was a very good year (p. 253).*

Brokaw writes his life's objectives to which many readers also aspire: "To make the most of the time remaining and to get through the autumn with grace, compassion, and always a commitment to leaving the world a little better place for family and everyone" (p. 253)—a model that senior readers can emulate.

Finally, Brokaw uses the storytelling technique that promote his message of Americans' need to work together to solve problems. He notes that he has shared the following true story with his granddaughters. A summary is as follows: Tom was overlooking the Boulder River which happened to be close to flood stage. He noticed a small herd of elks struggling to cross the rushing waters. All the elk were eventually able to cross except for a young elk that fell and was swept a short way downstream. He observed that as the young elk attempted to join the herd, he fell again and was washed farther downstream. Brokaw then saw the young elk's mother rescuing her young elk and guiding her calf to a crossing area of the river where they rejoined the herd.

Brokaw as a wise teacher uses this message to explain that as neighbors are faced with problems, they can feel lost and stranded with no one to help, [similar to the fears of the young elk]. Yet, Americans, similar to the mother elk, can reach out to lend a hand to others and solve problems

The book is an excellent read of today's American pulse with no weaknesses noted. It is highly recommended as a supplemental reading for students of business or social sciences, as well as a read of interest for laypersons interested in social responsibility. Everyone can benefit from the close-up look of problems facing Americans from all walks of life and the possible solutions that can be implemented with the spirit of citizens uniting to make life better. The book awakens the reader from a do-nothing state of complacency and propels him or her into an infectious longing to get involved, to solve problems, and to get all of us back on the right track. Mr. Brokaw, thank you for engaging us!

REFERENCES

Since this is a book review, there are no references. Below is information about the features of the reviewed book:

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