



# AN ANTIDOTE TO CYNICISM

*by Frances Hesselbein*

**W**hen a university student and a cadet at West Point ask me the same question, months apart, I have to think about why. Different times, different places, difference circumstances, yet the same question: “What makes you so positive?” “Why are you so positive, all the time?”

My reply begins with a somewhat flippant, “Well, you see, even my blood type is B-positive!” Then I go on to explain the “why” I am “so positive.” I tell them, “In my whole lifetime, in my own country I see the lowest level of trust, the highest level of cynicism, yet I am filled with hope for the future of our people, of our country.” Then I go on to tell them why. I talk about this generation now on campuses, at our military academies. This is a different generation from some earlier ones—far less cynical, more committed to serving, to making a difference. A recent *USA Today* study found that even though jobs are scarce and money is tight, it has not stopped this generation from helping others. Young adults who grew up in the shadow of the 9/11 attacks, saw the wreckage of hurricane Katrina, and searched for jobs during a recession are volunteering at home and abroad in record numbers.

For some time, I have been ending speeches to college and university students, cadets at West Point, and just last week to cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, “Ten years from now may they say of you, ‘the future called and they responded. They kept the faith.’ Then twenty years from now they will say of you, ‘Once again, the greatest generation.’” This has been my passionate belief, based on hundreds of encounters with this generation of college and university students, military academy cadets, and U.S. university students attending the Oxford Conclaves on Global Ethics in England.

As I have related in a recent column (“A Lifelong Commitment” in *Leader to Leader*, Number 55), the University of Pittsburgh Hesselbein Global Academy Summit participants

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reached a new high in civic and social engagement in July 2009. July 2010 will find us back at the University with 25 university students from all over the world, 25 students from universities across our country, and 13 mentors equally represented. I expect the same positive powerful engagement, the commitment we experienced in July 2009, with this new Summit of 2010.

April began with the third “Leadership Dialogue” at West Point, part of my Class of ’51 Chair for the Study of Leadership program. Margot Tyler of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and I shared our Leadership Dialogue with cadets, and then Margot spoke to a larger group of graduates, friends, cadets, and faculty at the gathering. I gave the closing speech to West Point’s 11th Annual Conference on Diversity. Three days at West Point in April and every moment positive and inspiring.

My next Leadership Dialogue will be in September with Alan Mulally, the President of Ford Motor Company. The cadets will be ready with their questions and a warm welcome.

All of these adventures provide a powerful antidote to cynicism. As I walk on university campuses, the grounds of the U.S. Air Force Academy recently, and West Point every six weeks, I find new energy and new hope from this generation.

Tomorrow I fly to Fort Benning to speak to our Army officers based there, then on to another fort, a very different one, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where Marshall Goldsmith and I will present a dialogue on “The Imperatives of Leadership.” With Marshall’s “Life is good” approach to life, “be positive” will permeate the day.

And yet I remember the question a student asked after my speech at another university a few years ago: “Why should I not be cynical?” I tried my best to respond with

all the positive reasons, yet I am not sure I succeeded. I asked him to “stay in touch” but I never heard from him again. His question haunts me and I try, in speeches to other university students, to give real live examples of positive initiatives in all three sectors that are addressing the challenges of our times—not theory, these examples have names, faces, documented results. Regular readers will remember their stories from many of my earlier columns.

For 20 years, the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Non-profit Management—now Leader to Leader Institute (only the name has changed) has tried to be a force for good, sharing awards, publications, and services with leaders and organizations in all three sectors, always sharing a positive view of the future and its possibilities. Peter Drucker’s philosophy, his work, his ten years as our honorary chairman inspired us, motivated us, and challenged us, and his influence is as powerful today as it was in 1990. We remember his profound wisdom: “It is not business, it is not government, it is the social sector that may yet save the society.”

Our 27 books in 30 languages bring positive, powerful resources to leaders in all three sectors. The Leader to Leader Institute’s newly redesigned Web site ([www.leadertoleader.org](http://www.leadertoleader.org)) carries video clips—Mark Thompson’s major contribution—featuring our Leadership Dialogues with great thought leaders and great corporate leaders—Jim Collins, Alan Mulally, Sir Richard Branson, Keith Ferrazzi, Darlyne Bailey, the Dalai Lama, Marshall Goldsmith, and others.

We can make a difference in these uncertain times. So as I observe, work, and engage with our new chairman, Fred Alstadt, the Institute’s Board of Governors, and the best executive staff team (which shares the board’s commitment), two words describe the next two years: Bright Future. No wonder my B-positive genes are showing that the very challenges of our times bring even greater opportunities to serve for all of us, in all three sectors.

*Frances Hesselbein is editor-in-chief of Leader to Leader, founding president of the Drucker Foundation, chairman of the board of governors of the Leader to Leader Institute, and former chief executive officer of the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A.*