Our friend W.H. Ferry --known to his friends as Ping --died October 7th. Ping and his wife Carol funded our work on and off for 20 years, importantly. Ping helped start us --and many others like us --down the road we are traveling today. He focused us on fundamentals, on real democracy, and gave us confidence that there was something down this road worth finding, if we would but start and keep going. Over the years, he and Carol sent clippings, books, questions, challenges, notes of encouragement, and checks.

At a memorial gathering for Ping October 24th, half a dozen of his friends spoke about him lovingly, describing his life and work in the context of their own, how he changed them, all of them. There must have been a couple of hundred people present --standing room only --because Ping touched many, many people during his 84 years. Two speakers in particular come to mind --Richard Grossman who had known Ping only for the last two or three years, and Bob Borosage, who had known Ping for a full 20.

For many people, Ping put on a gruff outer layer over his tweed jacket, bow tie and flat cloth hat. His was a formidable intellect and a great heart. He wrote and spoke with a terse directness, impatient to get to the point. I remember once on the phone with him from New Mexico, thanking him for a $1000 check he and Carol had sent out of the blue. He stopped me short in mid-sentence and said, "No. It is I who should be thanking you. You are the ones doing the work." I had never known a funder who reckoned the relationship quite that way.

Ping was the first person I ever met who saw that private corporations are central to our national (and local) problems. In 1960 he was arguing that private corporations are actually public in nature. "The aim where corporations are concerned," he wrote in 1960, "is to recognize the public character of certain vastly influential sectors of industry, to recognize that the decisions made by these sectors are public, and to begin to endow them with some of the accountability of other public institutions." When Ping wrote those words, Eisenhower was still President.

Ping didn't care if his ideas were unpopular. He cared if they were moral and made sense. From 1954 to 1969 he was second in command at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, where he continually stirred the pot. During the 1950s, he took on McCarthy and McCarthyism. He called J. Edgar Hoover a phoney and a demagogue. He took the CIA to task, as well as the rest of the so-called "intelligence" establishment, whom he now know willfully misled the President and the Congress for decades, needlessly escalating the arms race. Ping called for the abolition of the CIA, saying it was useless, worse than useless, a blight on the Republic.

In the 1960s, Ping focused on the corporation as the source of our troubles, which he saw rising all around him 35 years ago. Nearly 30 years later, in the early 90s, when Richard Grossman began to focus his own energies on the corporation, he returned to Ping's writings. They corresponded and became friends.

Ping knew in his bones what many other funders seem to have missed: that the cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy. In 1960, in a paper called "The Corporation for Good As Well As Gain," Ping argued. No need for government to do it by decree if corporations could reduce the chasm separating blacks from whites, somehow superior both in aim and practice...."

"It is no good to say that the constituents of a corporation have not the capacity, since these constituents demonstrably have the capacity, as citizens, to govern the most powerful of nations. It is no good to say that the constituents are not interested, for indeed they are, since the corporation is where they spend the bulk of their waking hours, where they invest their sweat and hopes, where they experience pleasure or lassitude, justice or injustice, achievement or ennui...."

"I am aware of the declaration by economists and political scientists that corporations must be undemocratic. That is because, they say, the quest for efficiency cannot be carried on except by decisions at the top based on total information about markets, processes, and costs. These arguments are old and respectable, and I challenge them. No one knows whether they are true because no one has tried to find out. In any event, the assertion that men can collectively make the judgments for a nation but not for a smaller political entity is a travesty of logic, to say nothing of a slur on the democratic doctrine.

"The main reason for self-government is that men are entitled to a voice in the affairs that touch them daily and intimately," Ping wrote in 1960. "This is not a theoretical assertion. There would, I hope, be an instant rebellion in this country if an effort were made to deprive the citizenry of the vote, that shiniest symbol of self-rule.

"Self-government would make life in the corporation more tolerable for all involved, even those who might now shudder at the thought of exchanging constitution for charter, by-laws for statutes of a corporate legislature, and judicial decisions for arbitrary actions. There is even a little evidence that it might prove efficient. When employees have been allowed to set their own conditions of work, they have not ordinarily come up with a counsel of anarchy. Production and standards have been met, and a good time had by all.

"The having of a good time by all is not an incidental consideration. It is near the heart of the case," Ping wrote. "Aside from the privileged few, there are not many who find joy, self-expression, or freedom in their offices and factories. A man is not free unless he is free to do his best, and this is a condition seldom encountered. Business and industry are not organized with this thought in mind. R.H. Tawney said: 'Since even quite common men have souls, no increase of material wealth will compensate them for arrangements which insult their self-respect and impair their freedom....'

"A cherished corporate legend is that governmental bureaucracy is inefficient, full of featherbedding dullahs, and tends toward venality, but the bureaucracy of the large company comprises highminded and overworked gentlemen whose eyes are on a brighter star. This line is one of the main strands of the political irresponsibility of corporations. Though it might, at first glance, seem merely an engaging self-deception, it, in fact, tears away at respect for law and government, which are the joint creations of people for their own good, and aggrandizes the private company as somehow superior both in aim and practice...."

In 1960, Ping could see that civic culture in America was in tatters -- and he thought corporations, if they chose to, might do something about it. For example, by establishing intentional hiring policies, corporations could reduce the chasm separating blacks from whites, Ping argued. No need for government to do it by decree if
corporations could mend some of the tatters voluntarily. But of course corporate hiring practices failed to turn in the needed direction, tatters have long since turned to shreds, and the government has turned its back.

At the memorial gathering for Ping on October 24th, Bob Borosage quoted a half dozen lines from "Dirge Without Music," by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Here is the whole poem:

Dirge Without Music

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground. So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind: Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned.

Lovers and thinkers, into the earth with you. Be one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust. A fragment of what you felt, of what you knew, A formula, a phrase remains,—but the best is lost.

The answers quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter, the love,— They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses. Elegant and curled Is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom. I know. But I do not approve. More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world.

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind; Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave. I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

Bob drew to a close his own thoughts about Ping like this:

"Ping was above all a great teacher --without a classroom. With students and acolytes scattered across generations and continents. Many of us here are proud to number ourselves among them.

"So it is hard to think of that mighty heart still. I do not approve.

"Well done, dear Ping. For you the past tense is too definite. You will surely grace our thoughts and goad our conscience, as you graced our lives.

"You will be greatly missed. And --as the rest of us soldier on --we would do well to follow the injunction you gave yourself in your 'progress report' written at age 75: The planet is growing in desperation and disarray; no interest in peace, except among 95% of the world's people; nonetheless and despite the odds, must keep on appointed course under lifelong banner, 'Don't let the bastards get away with it.'

"A toast to Ping. May we sustain his rage against the coming of the night."

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: w h ferry; carol ferry; funders; corporations; center for study of democratic institutions; richard grossman; bob borosage; bureaucracy; government; dirge without music; edna st vincent millay; obituaries;