What is Public Deliberation and Why is it Important?

(The following are excerpts from the book *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*, edited by Daniel Yankelovich and Will Friedman.)

The premise of the deliberative model, as Yankelovich explains it, is that people form judgments by exposing themselves to different perspectives. Deliberation consists of looking at a single issue through different lenses, seeing differences in how people approach it, and, in this way, understanding what advocates of each perspective find important, in the sense of both the key facts that inform their view and the values that underlie it. (Page 56)

At a time when proliferating media sources permit people to choose news and commentary that reinforce views they already hold (thus reinforcing the “Daily Me”), deliberative conversations offering alternative perspectives are particularly important. Largely as a result of the Internet, it is increasingly easy for people to tailor the news and opinion they get to their own preconceived views; as a result, the tendency is to live in ideological bubbles, insulated from the views of those who think differently. For that reason, it is more important than ever to create public spaces where a diversity of views can be heard and where people with different views can talk together. One intention of the NIF issue guides is to create such an environment, a framework that acknowledges different perspectives, each of which typically reflects common values that need to be heard if we are to identify shared concerns and common ground.

One fundamental question in political theory is whether citizens are capable of transcending their self-interest and moving toward a conception of the public good, or even capable of listening with an open mind to viewpoints they disagree with. In his prescription for a strong democracy, Ben Barber states the ideal in these words: “I will listen” means to the strong democrat, ‘I will put myself in his place. I will try to understand. I will strain to hear what makes us alike. I will listen for a common purpose or common good.’” To skeptics who dismiss the possibility that most people are capable of transcending their self-interest, this is a heroic and unrealistic assumption. For those of us who have helped prepare issue guides and moderated forums, listening to alternative perspectives is a necessary and practical step in the deliberative process. Forum moderators are reminded of their obligation to ensure that forums allow each perspective to be taken into consideration and presented with its best foot forward, as an inevitable subject of deliberation. And evidence shows that forum participants are not only perfectly capable but often eager to have this kind of conversation about issues that deeply concern them. (Pages 57-58)