00:12

Over the decades, my colleagues and I have exposed terrible misdeeds and crimes by large corporations, which have taken many lives and caused injuries and diseases, on top of damaging economic costs, affecting many incidents. But exposure was not enough. We had to secure congressional mandates to prevent such devastation. As a result, many lives were saved and many traumas prevented, especially in the areas of automobile, pharmaceutical, environmental and workplace health and safety.

00:49

Along the way, we kept getting one question again and again: "Ralph, how do you do all this? Your groups are small, your funds are modest and you don't make campaign contributions to politicians."

01:04

My response points to an overlooked, amazing pattern of American history. Just about every advance in justice, every blessing of democracy, came from the efforts of small numbers of individual citizens. They knew what they were talking about. They expanded public opinion, or what Abraham Lincoln called "the all-important public sentiment." The few citizens who started these movements enlisted larger numbers along the way to achieving these reforms and redirections. However, even at their peak, the actively engaged people never exceeded one percent of the citizenry, often far less.

01:49

These builders of democracy and justice came out of the antislavery drives, the pressures for women's right to vote. They rose from farmers and workers in industrial sectors demanding regulation of banks, railroads and manufacturers and fair labor standards. In the 20th century, improvements of life came with tiny third parties and their allies pushing the major parties in the electoral arena to adopt such measures, such as the right to form labor unions, the 40-hour week, progressive taxation, the minimum wage, unemployment compensation and social security. More recently came Medicare and civil rights, civil liberties, nuclear arms treaties, consumer and environmental triumphs -- all sparked by citizen advocates and small third parties who never won a national election. If you're willing to lose persistently, your causes can become winners in time.

02:58

(Laughter)

02:59

The story of how I came to these civic activities may be instructive for people who go along with Senator Daniel Webster's belief, "Justice, sir, is the great interest of man on earth."

03:12

I grew up in a small, highly industrialized town in Connecticut with three siblings and parents who owned a popular restaurant, bakery and delicatessen. Two waterways, the Mad River and the Still River, crossed alongside our main street. As a child, I asked why couldn't we wade and fish in them, like the rivers we read about in our schoolbooks. The answer: the factories freely use these rivers to dump harmful toxic chemicals and other pollutants. In fact, the companies took control of rivers that belonged to all of us for their own profitable pursuits. Later, I realized the rivers were not part of our normal lives at all, except when they flooded our streets. There were no water pollution regulations to speak of then. I realized only strong laws could clean up our waterways.

04:10

My youthful observation of our town's two river-sewers started a straight line to my eighth-grade graduation speech about the great conservationist, national park advocate John Muir, then to my studies at Princeton on the origins of public sanitation, and then to Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring." These engagements prepared me for seizing the golden hour of environmental lawmaking in the early 1970s. I played a leading citizen role in lobbying through Congress the Clean Air Act; the clean water laws, EPA; workplace safety standards, OSHA; and the Safe Drinking Water Act. If there's less lead in your body, no more asbestos in your lungs and cleaner air and water, it's because of those laws over the years.

05:04

Today, enforcement of these lifesaving laws under Trump is being dismantled wholesale. Rolling back these perils is the immediate challenge to a resurgent environmental movement for the young generation. As for consumer advocates, there are no permanent victories. Passing a law is only the first step. The next step, and the next step, is defending the law.

05:30

For me, some of these battles were highly personal. I lost friends in high school and college to highway collisions, the first leading cause of death in that age group. Then, the blame was put on the driver, derisively called "the nut behind the wheel." True, drunk drivers had responsibility, but safer-designed vehicles and highways could prevent crashes and diminish their severity when they occurred. There were no seat belts, padded dash panels, no airbags or other crash-worthy protections to diminish the severity of collisions. The brakes, tires and handling stability of US vehicles left much to be desired, even in comparison with foreign manufacturers. I liked to hitchhike, including back and forth from Princeton and Harvard Law School. Sometimes, a driver and I came upon ghastly crash scenes. The horrors made a deep impression on me. They sparked my writing a paper at law school on unsafe automotive design and the need for motor vehicle safety laws.

06:41

One of my closest friends at law school, Fred Condon, was driving home one day from work to his young family in New Hampshire and momentarily drowsed behind the wheel of his station wagon. The vehicle went to the shoulder of the road and tipped over. There were no seat belts in 1961. Fred became a paraplegic.

07:04

Such preventable violence created fire in my belly. The auto industry was cruelly refusing to install long-known lifesaving safety features and pollution controls. Instead, the industry focused on advertising the annual style changes and excessive horsepower. I was outraged. The more I investigated the suppression of auto safety devices, publicized evidence from court cases about the auto companies negligently harming vehicle occupants -- especially the instability of a GM vehicle called the Corvair -- the more General Motors was keen on discrediting my writings and testimony. They hired private detectives to follow me in order to get dirt.

07:52

After the publication of my book, "Unsafe at Any Speed," GM wanted to undermine my forthcoming testimony before a Senate subcommittee in 1966. The Capitol Police caught them. The media was all over the struggle in Congress between me and giant General Motors. With remarkable speed compared to today, in 1966, Congress and President Johnson brought the largest industry in America under federal regulation for safety, pollution control and fuel efficiency. By the year 2015, three and a half million deaths were averted just in the US, millions more injuries prevented, billions of dollars saved.

08:37

What did it take for a victory against such overwhelming odds? Well, there were: one, a few advocates who knew how to communicate the evidence everywhere; two, several key receptive congressional committee chairs led by three senators; three, about seven reporters from major newspapers who regularly reported on the unfolding story; four, President Lyndon Johnson, with assistance, amenable to creating a regulatory safety agency, NHTSA; and five, a dozen auto engineers, inspectors and physicians who divulged crucial information, and who need to be better known.

09:25

One more factor was critical: informed public opinion. A majority of people learned about how much safer their cars could be. They wanted their vehicles to be fuel-efficient. They wanted to breathe cleaner air. The result: in September 1966, President Lyndon Johnson signed the safety legislation in the White House with me by his side, receiving a pen!

09:50

(Laughter)

09:51

Between 1966 and 1976, those six critically connected factors were used over and over. It became the golden age of legislation and regulatory action for consumer, worker and environmental protection. Those connected elements of our past campaigns need to be kept in mind by people striving to do the same today for drinking water safety, antibiotic resistance deaths, criminal justice reform, risks from climate disruption, bio- and nanotech impacts, the nuclear arms race, peace treaties, dangers to children, chemical and radioactive perils, and the like. According to a solid study in 2016 by Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, preventable hospital deaths take a mind-boggling 5,000 lives a week in America.

10:50

The 1980s climax: our dramatic struggle to limit smoking in public places, regulate the tobacco industry and establish conditions for reducing smoking. Their struggle began in earnest in 1964, with the US Surgeon General's famous report linking cigarette smoking to cancer and other diseases. Over 400,000 deaths a year in the United States are related to smoking. Public hearings, litigation, media exposés and industry whistleblowers joined with crucial medical scientists to take on a very powerful industry. I asked Michael Pertschuk, a leading Senate staffer, how many full-time advocates were working on tobacco industry control at that time. Mr. Pertschuk estimated no more than 1,000 full-time champions in the US pressing for a smoke-free society. I say that's a remarkably small number of people making it happen. They had a public opinion majority of aroused people, nonsmokers, behind them. Many smokers were quitting the nicotine addiction. Just think: from 45 percent of adults down to 15 percent by 2018. The tipping point was when Congress passed legislation empowering the Food and Drug Administration to regulate the tobacco companies.

12:20

Keep in mind that advances for consumers and workers are usually followed by a variety of corporate counterattacks. When the fervor behind such reform fades, then legislatures and regulatory agencies become very vulnerable to industry capture that stalls existing or further enforcement. What's that saying? "Justice requires constant vigilance." We see the difference between the driven stamina of counterattacking, profit-driven corporate power and the fatigue that overcomes a voluntary citizenry whose awareness and skill need renewal. It is not a fair contest between large companies like General Motors, Pfizer, ExxonMobil, Wells Fargo, Monsanto, plus other very wealthy companies and lobbyists, compared to people protection groups with very limited resources.

13:21

Moreover, the corporations have immunities and privileges unavailable to real human beings. For example, Takata was guilty of a horrific airbag scandal, but the company escaped criminal prosecution. Instead, Takata was allowed to go bankrupt and its executives kept nice nest eggs.

13:43

But organized people need not be awed by corporate power. Lawmakers still want votes more than they need campaign finance from corporations. We far outnumber corporations in potential influence. But voters must be connected clearly to what organized voters want from the lawmakers. Delegating the constitutional authority of "we the people," we want them to do the people's work. A people's Congress, the most constitutionally powerful branch of government, can override, block or rechannel the most destructive corporations. There are only 100 senators and 435 representatives with just two million organized activists back home, a Congress watchdog hobby.

14:39

Congressional justice can be made reliable and prompt. We've proved that again and again with far fewer people. But today, Congress, marinated in campaign money, has been abdicating its responsibilities to an executive branch which too often has become a corporate state controlled by big companies. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in 1938, in a message to Congress, called concentrated corporate power over our government quote -- fascism -- end quote. A modest engagement of one percent of adults in each of the 435 congressional districts, summoning senators and representatives or state legislators to their own town meetings, where the citizenry presents their agenda, backed by a majority of voters, can turn Congress around. Our representatives can become a fountainhead of democracy and justice, elevating human possibilities.

15:39

I dream of our schools, or after-school clinics, teaching community civic action skills, leading to the good life. Adult education classes should do the same. We need to create citizen training and action libraries. Students and adults love knowledge that relates to their daily lives. Large majorities of Americans, regardless of political labels, favor a living wage, universal health

insurance, real enforcement against corporate crime, fraud and abuse. They want a fair, productive tax system, public budgets returning value to the people back home in modern infrastructure, and an end to most corporate subsidies. Increasingly, they're demanding serious attention to climate disruption and other environmental and global health perils and pandemics. Big majorities of people want efficient government, an end to endless, aggressive wars that boomerang. They want clean elections and fair rules for voters and candidates. These are changes that bring people together, changes Congress can make happen.

16:49

People around the world favor democracy, because it brings the best out of its inhabitants and its leaders. But this objective requires citizens to want to spend time on this great opportunity called democracy, between and at elections. History gives examples that encourage us to believe that breaking through power is easier than we think.

17:11

People say to me, "I don't know what to do!" Start to learn by doing. The more they practice citizen action, the more skilled and innovative they become at it. Like learning a trade, a profession, a hobby, learning how to swim, their doubts, prejudgments and hesitancy begin to melt away in the crucible of action. Their arguments for change become deeper and sharper.

17:35

From 1965 to 1966, when I was making the case for safer automobiles, I realized that there were a lot of industries making a lot of money from dealing with the horrific results of crashes: medical care, insurance sales, repairing cars ... There was a perverse incentive to do nothing but maintain the status quo. By contrast, preventing these tragedies frees consumer dollars to spend or save in voluntary [ways] for better livelihoods.

18:08

What it takes is a small number of people to exert their civic muscle, both as individuals and organized groups, on our legal decision makers. Ideally, it only takes a few enlightened rich

people contributing funds to accelerate citizen efforts against the commanders of greed and power. Why, in our past, rich people donated essential money for the antislavery, women's right to vote and civil rights movements. We should remember that.

18:37

With the onset of climate catastrophe, every one of us needs to have a higher estimate of our own significance, of our own sustained dedication to the civic life, as part of a normal way of daily living, along with our personal family life. Showing up thoughtfully is half of democracy. That's what advances life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

19:00

Remember, our country is full of problems we don't deserve and solutions which we do not apply. That gap is a democracy gap that no power can stop us from closing. We owe this to our posterity. Don't we want our descendants, instead of cursing us for our shortsighted neglect, don't we want them to bless our foresight and bright horizons which can fulfill their lives peacefully and advance the common good?

19:30

Thank you.

19:32

(Applause)