

Against Apathy: Role Models for Engagement

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We hear a lot about the retreat of students from public life. The annual surveys suggest they care less each year about the environment, racial understanding, community-action programs, or even discussing political issues. So their generation has been repeatedly accused of apathy—simply not caring. Yet as I travel to speak, visit classes, and lead workshops at campuses throughout the country, I see less indifference and more learned helplessness—the feeling that they can't change the world, so why try?

Wherever I go, small groups of students do tackle the critical issues of our times: environmental threats, illiteracy, growing gaps between the rich and the poor. But most feel too overwhelmed. They'll do important work volunteering one on one, because that's tangible and concrete. But when asked to imagine themselves taking on the deeper roots of issues they care about, they come up blank. Our culture hasn't given them the models to take action.

To foster their engagement, we need to give them models and help them overcome what psychologist Robert Jay Lifton calls the "broken connection" between their values and actions, between the world they inherit and the one they'll pass on. To do that, we need to understand the barriers they face, like our society's pervasive cynicism.

Civic Resignation

Thirty-five years ago, the largest obstacle to social commitment among the young was a misplaced trust in received authorities: in government and major corporations. Vietnam-era movements challenged this blind trust, but as they faded and as their most significant accomplishments were caricatured or forgotten, they ceased to provide models of engagement. America's current cynicism feeds on the assumption that these movements and their successors failed or betrayed noble ideals. It also grows out of the contrast between pious talk of democracy and realities in which corporate lobbyists write legislation and politicians are bought and sold like trading cards. It feeds as well on our dominant culture's disdain of those who'd try and create a more humane world.

Bill Clinton fueled this cynicism with his sex scandals and the gap between talking populism while incessantly courting wealthy donors. The Bush administration threatens to increase it still further, mixing platitudes about "compassionate conservatism" with relentless service to the most powerful economic interests, attacks on the environment, and cuts in funding for child-abuse prevention and low-income health care. Too often, our students

know serious injustices exist but decide they are simply the way of the world, and there's no way to change it. Their withdrawal helps make this judgment a reality.

Students also face economic barriers. Each year, they seem to put in more hours at outside jobs and go deeper into debt. They've grown up in a flourishing yet precarious and divided economy, which encourages them to take the most practical path. When the "dot.coms" were booming, working for poverty wages in an impoverished community seemed a sucker's choice, although many students did so nonetheless. Now, as the economy staggers and falters, day-to-day survival presses more harshly, which makes social commitment still tougher.

These pressures are real. "You worry that if you don't do everything right, you'll end up at the bottom, where it looks pretty mean," a young woman from the State University of New York at Buffalo recently told me. "It's hard to graduate with \$40,000 in loans and try to pursue a social change career," said an environmental activist from Pennsylvania's Albright College. She took on varied causes nonetheless, but others equally pressed often don't. We need to respect the stresses on students' lives, while acknowledging the roots of those stresses in policy choices—like decisions to let the value of the minimum wage and of federal student grants stagnate.

At the same time, we have to address the perceptual barriers, which dissuade student involvement even more than do the material ones. Our cultural myths suggest people are either socially active or not: a few saints or crazies storm out of the womb with protest signs in their hands, but the rest of us are normal and leave the messy business of changing society to others. The two paths never cross. But as educators, we know our students can change their values, perspectives, and commitments—and grow in powerful ways.

I think of a student at Connecticut's Fairfield University, a wealthy doctor's son I'll call Tim. "We gave the blacks a lot," Tim said, when I interviewed him as a first-year student. "Is it my fault if me or my parents make the bucks so they can't?" He wondered whether racial inequality was "maybe biological."

"I want the things I have now," Tim explained, "a nice house, a nice car, a nice boat. I want to make enough to buy a place of my own, where . . . if someone's bothering me, I can say 'Buddy, buzz off, this is mine. This is what I've paid for.'"

Then Tim began to learn and to think. He was a premed student when a young professor brought environmental issues into his organic chemistry class. At first Tim resisted, then he started listening. Soon he joined a

campus environmental group and went into environmental remediation as a career. Now he cringes at his earlier attitude. He says that had his teacher not had the courage to raise difficult public issues, he never would have changed.

Doubts and Uncertainties

Wherever we are in our institutions, we can influence students in similarly powerful ways. Most enter our campuses with an attitude of civic resignation, believing their actions on major public issues can't matter. They're "just not that kind of person who takes a public stand," they explain, saying they lack the knowledge, standing, and skills to take effective action.

This lack of confidence stems from what I call the perfect standard. Students decide that before they take a public stand on an issue, they need to know every fact, figure, and statistic, and be eloquent enough to debate Henry Kissinger on *Nightline*. This assumption makes civic engagement into a quiz show performance—Who Wants to Be an Activist?

Students caught in this mindset feel that before they act, they need perfect confidence about their passion for the issue, perfect motives for taking it on, and the certainty that it's the best cause imaginable. "I'd like to get involved in issues of children's poverty," said a young woman at Ohio's Denison University. "But there are so many aspects: illiteracy, unemployment, youth violence, and abuse. I start thinking about everything I could do and end up so exhausted I never begin." Particularly on issues where they're likely to take some heat, most students doubt their knowledge and question whether the risk of speaking out is worth critical judgments from their peers.

Politically disengaged students also apply this perfect standard to the personal lives of those who do take public stands—disdaining them for lacking Gandhian standards of purity, or for expressing any mixed feelings on the issues they take on. The disengaged find it hard to imagine that human beings with ordinary hesitations and flaws might end up helping to change the world.

I'm not advocating ignorance. But the perfect standard is like a high jump bar that always exceeds the students' reach. The more they know about an issue, the more they feel they need to know. Students who do get involved, like any citizen activists, find a different way. They admit to not knowing everything from the start, then take the leap nonetheless. They proceed step by step. They learn as they go, including from those with whom they disagree. Their involvement engages their hearts and minds.

A young African American woman in Atlanta, a recent Emory graduate, worked setting up a series of concerts that brought together rock groups with their mainly white audiences, hip-hop groups with their largely black followings, and community organizers, all on the same bill, to help bridge racial divides. She'd recently heard a talk by one of Martin Luther King's old professors, and was delighted to learn that King had gotten a C in his philosophy class at Morehouse. "If he could get a C and go on to do everything he accomplished," she said, "it makes me feel like anything is possible."

I'm not suggesting we encourage our students to get C's. Though one might think social involvement could divert students from their academic path, studies suggest that community involvement in fact makes it more likely that students will have successful undergraduate experiences and even go on to graduate programs. But they do need to learn that they needn't be saints or impossibly knowledgeable experts to make a difference. If they want to succeed, they may stumble and fall occasionally. And when they do act, they may gain a powerful voice.

Role Models

To learn these lessons, they need examples of people who take action despite their doubts and uncertainties, and keep on despite apparent failures. They can get these models from the present or the past, but they have to get them somewhere. Yet most know little about the movements that have most changed America.

Take Rosa Parks, one of the few activists whose name students know. Most believe, in concert with our prevailing myths, that Parks came out of nowhere to change history instantly when she refused to move to the back of a Montgomery, Alabama, bus. Yet before refusing to give up her bus seat, Parks had spent twelve years helping lead the local NAACP chapter. The summer before, she'd attended a ten-day training session at Tennessee's labor and civil rights organizing school, the Highlander Center, where she'd met an older generation of civil rights activists and discussed the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision banning "separate but equal" schools.

In other words, Parks didn't come out of nowhere. She didn't single-handedly give birth to the civil rights movement. She didn't act alone, or on a whim. Instead, she was part of an existing effort for change at a time when success was far from certain. That in no way diminishes the power and historical importance of her refusal to give up her seat. But it reminds us that this tremendously consequential act might never have taken place without the humble and frustrating work that she and others did earlier on. It reminds us that her initial step of getting involved was just as courageous and critical as the fabled moment when she refused to move to the back of the bus. It refutes the myth that anyone who takes a committed public

stand—or at least an effective one—must be a larger-than-life figure, someone with more time, energy, courage, vision, eloquence, and knowledge than any normal person—and certainly more than an eighteen- or twenty-year-old student—could ever possess.

Only a handful of students know this history. Most know even less about the efforts of the Populists, the abolitionists, the women’s suffrage movement, and the union movements. As a result, they have little sense of what it takes to act and persist for a difficult cause. As a student from West Virginia told me recently, “They teach the conclusions: ‘Lincoln freed the slaves. Women got the vote. Some unions were organized.’ We never learn how change actually occurred.” Another described seeing a picture of a large Washington D.C. march in his textbook, and having no idea how participants mustered the hope, vision, and organizational energy to make it possible. Even when they think they know the stories, as with the Rosa Parks example, our culture misleads them.

Students have also been taught little about more recent examples of courage and commitment. I can go to any campus in the country, ask about the American student antiapartheid movement, and get nothing but blank looks. This movement of the mid-1980s and early 1990s touched colleges across America. It played a key role, in the judgment of every serious observer, in finally passing sanctions on South Africa and helping pave the way for democracy. Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu even told one student I interviewed, “I just want to thank you for what you American students did. We might not have achieved our freedom without it.” But most young women and men can’t take sustenance from this history, because they don’t know about it. In all the articles maligning students of the past two decades for apathy, the media rarely deign to mention this counterexample.

Nor have most students learned in any substantive way about the powerful current efforts of their peers—sweatshop boycotts, environmental initiatives, union organizing campaigns, challenges to the death penalty, or local community projects. From watching the TV news reports of the World Trade Organization protests of 1999, they’d never know that thousands of young nonviolent activists helped foster a global dialogue on critical trade issues. The media showed only the handful of black-clad crazies breaking windows.

Granted, many of these efforts take place below the national radar: a single mother at Buffalo’s Erie Community College helps lead a campaign to save threatened paralegal and nursing programs; students at Seattle Central Community College fight to protect endangered Northwest salmon runs; American University students get the food contract with Sodexo Marriott canceled because of the corporation’s role as the major investor in Corrections Corporation of America, a company that runs privatized

prisons. But even when students are participating in coordinated national campaigns, like protests over the inadequacy of federal student financial aid, they’re unlikely to get significant thoughtful coverage. Lacking context, it’s easy for students to doubt their potential role in social change.

The Small Picture

The exceptions, of course, are the growing community-service efforts, perhaps because participants don’t have to deal with frustrating and painful questions of how to shift an entire society. Today’s students volunteer in large numbers at food banks, homeless shelters, literacy campaigns, Big Brothers and Sisters programs, senior centers, and an array of other worthy projects. Historically, volunteerism has ebbed and flowed in tandem with broader social advocacy. Now, however, they’ve separated. The one-on-one efforts definitely matter, but in a more limited context. And even those students most involved often feel they can do little to shape the larger public choices that so affect the communities they serve. I think of a Stanford student who exclaimed, in all innocence, “I’ve learned so much volunteering in this shelter. I just hope my grandchildren get the chance to volunteer in the same shelter.” He meant well, but as his friends reminded him, they hoped that by time their grandchildren came around, people wouldn’t have to be lining up for food in the richest nation on earth.

When a SUNY Buffalo environmental studies professor asked his students how to respond to George Bush’s environmental depredations, they suggested driving their cars less and recycling more—but not taking any larger actions to challenge the policies they opposed. It’s far easier for students to decide that the way to change the world is to get everyone to become a vegan than to tackle powerful economic interests, even around related issues like the sustainability of our food production.

A decade ago, many of us thought that simply getting students out into the community would lead to further engagement. It does teach them valuable lessons about compassion and connection, and we’d do well to build on the burgeoning K–12 volunteer initiatives that involve students in a broader world, and bring these efforts to our campuses with a greater inclination at least to get out and help. But mere volunteerism doesn’t automatically lead to speaking out on public choices, no matter how related the activity is to students’ areas of concern. We need to help them take the lessons of their service a step further, to become advocates and witnesses.

Ordinary People Turned Extraordinary

Whatever causes stir the hearts of our students, we can play a critical role in conveying their power as potential historical actors. We can provide the models and perspectives lacking in our culture. They respond when I tell

them the real Rosa Parks story. Or when I describe a San Antonio woman with an eighth-grade education who ended up testifying before Congress, and a 101-year-old environmental activist who took on cause after cause with humor and grace almost until the day she died last year. These stories remind them that lives of commitment are possible.

We need to bring such models of engagement into our curriculums, drawing on the growing service-learning efforts promoted by organizations like Campus Compact. Otherwise, even if we address the problems of our time, we may largely foster despair. Finding examples of engagement may be easier in some disciplines than others, but if the young organic chemistry professor hadn't challenged his Fairfield students, Tim might still be embracing the worldview of "Buddy, buzz off." An accounting professor at a Minnesota community college has her students study the federal budget. At the University of Utah, professors in disciplines as diverse as architecture and economics encourage their students to earn an extra course credit by working with local community projects, reading books on citizen involvement, and writing journals or papers on their experiences. Other faculty bring local citizen activists into their classes, or present engaged models through appropriate readings. Our students aren't all going to agree on the same principles or political positions. But the more we create a space for them to reflect on broader community involvement, and the more we give them a sense of how their actions can matter, the more they will respond. No student should graduate from our campuses without a sense of how to address the core issues of our time.

Whatever our academic role, we can work to give students the strength and courage to think through what they care about most—and act on it. The more we ourselves are involved, the more we can inspire them. When our students see us testifying at campus or community hearings, working in a soup kitchen, writing letters to the editor of our local papers, or taking a stand on issues we believe in, this helps them surmount their fears of speaking out. They see people they know and respect trying to act for the greater common good, and this inspires them. It gives them a sense that these questions can be part of their lives as well.

Two thousand years ago, Rabbi Hillel asked, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?" Our students understand the first question all too well. They fear they're on their own in an unforgiving world. But no one has taught them the answer to the second one—that they cannot fulfill their humanity by adopting the enclave stance of "Buddy buzz off." Many would like to be involved, but talk of infinitely deferring their involvement to some time when they will have more status, power, and standing. So do we, for that matter. We need to teach them the meaning of "If not now, when?" because justice deferred is justice denied, and involvement endlessly deferred is passivity. But if we give them models enough, they just might join that stream of ordinary people turned extraordinary who've helped shape a better world for us all.