

Activism: The Heart of Citizenship

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Some time ago I began to ask my students what words came to mind when they heard the word “activist?” Many of the words they offered—demonstrator, environmentalist, agitator, troublemaker, malcontent—had a negative shading. I was surprised that activists were not seen simply as citizens practicing democracy.

Indeed, one of the best kept secrets in America is that active citizens have been the lifeblood of our cherished democracy. For example, in the early days of our Republic fewer than 10% of the population voted. That privilege was restricted to white males who owned land; no one else was permitted to vote. It has only been by virtue of a string of citizen’s movements over the last two hundred years that this democratic “given” has been extended to those without property, to women and to people of all races.

In the face of the monumental social injustices, environmental degradation, and armed violence now confronting humanity, it seems that many people, students included, have lost their faith in the power of participatory democracy. I think that one reason that so many of us feel disempowered is that we are caught in the trap of the “perfect standard.” Paul Loeb in his book, Soul of a Citizen, describes the trap this way:

Before we allow ourselves to take action on an issue, we must be convinced not only that the issue is the world’s most important, but that we have perfect understanding of it, perfect moral consistency in our character, and that we will be able to express our views with perfect eloquence.

We can avoid the trap of the “perfect standard” if we recognize that we are all authorities where our own life is concerned. I have learned this lesson from my sister, Ann Marie. When she is troubled by our country’s actions and policies, she sometimes travels to Washington D.C. to talk to her congressional representatives and their aides. Ann Marie is a pre-school teacher, not a political analyst, so one day I asked her how she mustered the courage and authority to lobby on The Hill. She admitted that, at first, it was intimidating, but then one day it hit her that these “officials” were ordinary people, just like her, who just happen to be in positions of power. When I asked her what she actually said when she visited her congressional representatives, she responded that she simply shares with them her concerns and the pain she feels when our leaders fail to live up to our country’s highest principles and values.

When we believe in the legitimacy of our individual life experience and bring our voice forward into public life, we are citizens practicing democracy. Ann Marie doesn’t buy into any “perfect standard;” rather, her “standard” is defined by what has heart and meaning for her.

Often the most powerful language that citizens have for effecting change comes not from the head, but from the heart. You know this “heart language” when you hear it. For example, imagine that your local government officials have convened to discuss a proposal to widen a road to accommodate more traffic. Representatives from the police department, the fire department, and the traffic planning commission give data-rich presentations explaining why it would be advisable to widen the road. The issue appears to be settled but, then, in the back of the room a mother slowly rises with an infant on her shoulder and speaks of what a

wider road with more cars and faster speeds will mean for the safety of the children in her neighborhood. This woman is real; she talks from the heart; her concern comes from her own experience. Suddenly, widening the road is no longer simply a project on paper. There is a shift in the room. The Council hesitates. What seemed to be a routine matter is now imbued with heart.

It is well past time for all of us, students included, to remember that “activism” is citizenship in action—a manifestation of our caring for ourselves, our communities and our institutions; it is a life-long practice involving a profound commitment to personal authenticity, truth seeking, and the common good. Gandhi spoke to the budding citizen in all of us when he said: "Almost anything you do will seem insignificant, but it is very important that you do it." Indeed, in the end, it is the little acts, done in a spirit of care that are important because everyone influences everyone else. If your life is compassionate, you influence your family. If your family is compassionate, your family influences the community. If your community is compassionate, your community influences the nation. If your nation is a compassionate, your nation influences the world.