

Project Citizen Conference
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Civic Duty

Thank you very much for the privilege of addressing you on the topic of civic duty and participation. As is frequently the case when I am speaking to a group of folks who know much more than I do about a particular topic, I want to make it clear that I am not here to offer you blessings or impart any wisdom about which you are not already very familiar or provide some simple prescription for involving youth in the political process.

Plato noted long ago, that the great danger in this world of moral ambiguities where every thing is questioned and simple assertions of moral authority are not adequate is the man who peddles easy answers to complex questions, and the greatest danger of all is the man who has only one answer to a host of different questions.

I will do my best to heed both of Plato's warnings. Rather, I am hopeful that you will find it your hearts to bless me as I ask your indulgence to overlook the paucity of my knowledge and the shallowness of my experience. I am relying on your good graces to permit me to both encourage and honor the good work that you have done and will no doubt continue to do on behalf of the young people whom we seek to mutually serve.

I have had the great good fortune in my brief political career to work with two groups of students who brought ideas to me which we were able to draft into cogent and most importantly passable legislation. Together, and I do emphasize together, we were able

to shepherd both pieces through the often cumbersome, confusing process of the state legislature. Ultimately, both groups had the experience of watching our Governor sign their ideas into law.

While I am most grateful to be a State Representative, I do have other roles in my life that are of far greater responsibility, namely, as a father, grandfather and director of an agency that has 180 foster children in care on any given day. Nevertheless, functioning as guide and guardian to a group of young people in pursuit of an idea has brought me the most satisfaction of my nascent political career.

Although I suspect that the citizens of Dallas have long since tired of references to the their rendezvous with infamy some 42 years ago, I must confess that since this is my first trip to this city my thoughts have been preoccupied with November 22, 1963 since I was first invited to speak to you. I apologize to anyone in the audience who is thinking to themselves at this moment, “Oh not again.”

I did find the speech that John Kennedy was to give in Dallas on that afternoon relevant to the topic of civic participation. He was going to tell the Dallas Citizens Council that:

“America’s leadership must be guided by the lights of learning and reason or else those who confuse rhetoric with reality and the plausible with the possible will gain ascendancy with their seemingly swift and simple solutions to every world problem”.

The students that were able to translate ideas into law learned that the process was anything but simple and swift. They learned that what may appear as a self-evident solution to a problem is often times a much harder sell as it works its way through the labyrinth of the legislative process. They also learned, I hope, that civic duty is a function of action not simply good intent or thoughts.

Goodness always had an active quality about it for the ancient Greeks. Goodness was not a passive condition of the soul, like innocence; nor was it simply to be well-intentioned. To be good was to do good things, and to be considered good was to be seen to be doing them. Doing good requires practice so that it becomes second nature. No amount of diligent study of the list of good acts will produce good persons.

Civic duty is action. That was a lesson of my youth.

As a young boy, like many people of my generation, my attention was drawn that fateful day to this city. Growing up in Arizona I have no recollection of having given Dallas a thought prior to November 22, 1963. Yet, from age 11 on, it became for me a city of infamy and mystery; confusion and frankly, fear.

So besides having flown through the airport on a couple of occasions, here I am for the first time, 42 years after that day when my sense of what civic duty meant was altered and confused with the gun shots that reverberated through Dealy Plaza.

I visited the plaza yesterday afternoon, I wanted to experience first hand the place where some of my innocence was lost and my sense of duty was at least partially found, before I spoke to you today.

In preparation of my remarks I, of course, thought back to when and how my own sense of civic duty was enkindled. Growing up in Catholic schools at the ascendancy of the first Catholic president was certainly a factor.

I can remember my third grade teacher, Sister Mary Cecile, bringing a TV into the room on a Friday so we could watch John Kennedy's inauguration. We all heard that call to duty,

“And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country.”

Sure we were young, but the sentence came to epitomize the Kennedy administration. The words became the slogan for civic participation in this country and the world at large.

And so those 24 words have called out to me since that day. Sometimes, they came only in a faint whisper and at others they reverberated like a loud clarion call. Ask what you can do; not what you can think or feel or ponder about, **but what can you do!**

In a speech that was to be delivered later that same evening to a group of party loyalists in Austin, Texas, President Kennedy was going to say this:

“For this country is moving and it must not stop. It cannot stop. For this is a time for courage and a time for challenge. Neither conformity nor complacency will do. Neither the fanatics nor the faint-hearted are needed. And our duty as a party is not to our party alone, but to the Nation, and, indeed, to all mankind. Our duty is not merely the preservation of political power but the preservation of peace and freedom.”

I would like to suggest to you that this is a good mission statement for Civic Education. A mission statement always answers the question, why?

The preservation of peace and freedom is dependent upon people of action and daring and that is why you must teach civic responsibility, duty and action. The call to civic duty and subsequently to those of you who are trying to provide a civic education must instill the need for the youth in your charge to respond to the call for action.

Robert Kennedy ably took up the torch that his brother prematurely passed on to him a few years earlier. Robert noted in what is probably his most famous speech given in Capetown, South Africa in 1966 that the hope for the future of peace and freedom that the President referred to in the undelivered speech was always to be found in youth, he said:

“Our answer is the world's hope; it is to rely on youth. This world demands the qualities of youth: not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the life of ease...”

This quote emphasizes the purpose and the urgency of the mission to activate and energize the youth in your charge to recognize how desperately the world needs them. It is a hard sell, but youth really is made for heroism and not simply pleasure.

You have the awesome task of convincing the youth under your influence that they are the people that they are waiting for; no one else is coming to save the world, it is them and them alone.

The young women and men who worked with me on the anti-bullying and the drivers education bills were such people. They tasted victory but only because they made it a point to persevere and not give up. They chose action over indifference.

Teaching, being both art and science, takes an enormous amount of time to master. The master teacher prods without pushing, encourages without excoriating and challenges without chastising. In so doing, the most powerful of all desires is triggered, the unquenchable thirst for both knowledge and action.

You who teach civic education are then both artists and scientists and your task of leading youth into the world of civic duty rests at the core of the central purpose of all education.

There are numerous types of tests, some more practical and useful than others. Reducing all that a student should have mastered in twelve years of schooling to a single test would be quite an achievement. I would suggest that it is not possible to do so, for the simple reason that there is far more to the development of young people than reading, writing and mathematics.

To assert that academic mastery is the sole purpose of attending twelve years of school is to insult a profession that really is older than any other, that is, the art and science of leading and guiding the young to take their place in society.

The root of the word **education** means to lead. The purpose of education in a civil society is to first lead youth into good citizenship.

Any measurement that has its sole purpose revealing what a child has mastered in academics reveals only a small portion of what is really important in the education of citizens. It will tell you very little about how the individual has mastered the basics of citizenship, that is, the skills of civility, the ability of a young person to build and sustain relationships or how prepared they are to participate in community.

A classroom is not just a place where a child acquires content information about particular subjects. It is also an incubator of interpersonal development where the young learn the fundamentals of communicating effectively with peers as well as adults, and along with reading, writing and mathematics, is exposed to the essential elements of good citizenship. This is just one of the many reasons that teachers are so important.

Under the tutelage of a skilled teacher in a safe and enriching environment character is formed. Over time, skills, essential to success in the world of work, such as learning to cooperate, share

and play with others, negotiating and compromising are learned, practiced and demonstrated.

The classroom is really a dynamic interactive laboratory where the correlation is made between effort and results, where a portfolio of success is assembled and failure is transformed into the opportunity to learn.

In the classroom, the schoolyard, the lunchroom children are exposed to how others think and feel, believe and perceive the world. Here is where a young person uncovers the diversity of cultures, attitudes, thoughts and values of others

Many tests are administered in our schools beyond the academic assessment, the results of which will never be reported or recorded. These tests include the practical application of one's family values and their applicability to the broader world. It is at school, in and out of the classroom, where judgment and the ability to discern right from wrong will be challenged and given its first test outside the confines of family.

One's individuality and personhood are tested by the relentless assault of peer pressures. Worldviews are developed and modified as children are exposed to other perspectives. These are the tests that will best predict the success or failure that these children will experience in the world of work, and marriage and community.

The most important outcome of an education is the development of good citizens who reach an academic milestone with a hunger for knowledge and an eagerness to be engaged in society so as to reach their optimum potentials. Their hunger for knowledge becomes a lifelong pursuit because it serves to further connect them with others. Their hunger for action makes them not only taxpayers but civic-minded individuals who participate actively in their communities.

The central question should be, has the school prepared a student for citizenship? Surely, school districts should ascertain what it is they want their students to master academically. But far more of their time should be focused on ensuring that graduation means that their students have completed their apprenticeship in citizenship.

Our graduation requirements should mimic this reality. Academic test results reveal only a part of the purpose of a good education. Grades matter because they reflect achievement but also effort, cooperation and participation as well; the very building blocks of citizenship.

Engaging in meaningful community service projects gives students a taste of what it is to build and not simply consume. In service to others youth develop a regard for community and justice, key elements of citizenship.

The purpose is to graduate good citizens. These are individuals prepared to enter the world of work or higher education not only because they have basic academic skills but also because they have an eagerness to acquire knowledge and skills that will ultimately contribute to the greater good of the society that they are about to inherit. That is the ultimate test of a good education.

The old and young alike often define themselves by their accomplishments of education or income or some other marker of status. I would suggest that in the process of instilling civic duty in students that we should focus not simply on experience but perhaps just as importantly on expectation and imagination.

Let me illustrate that from an example from the last winter Olympic Games in the woman's individual figure skating event. You may recall that the winner of the individual woman's gold

was a young American girl who was not expected to place in the top three, let alone win.

Sarah Hughes, however, skated the routine of a life time and took the gold medal right from her more experienced and seasoned competitors. After her final Olympic figure skating routine she was literally on the floor in shock.

At that very moment she made one of the most profound and compelling observations I have ever heard. She said in that spontaneous moment of exhilaration and disbelief;
“I did things that I can not do.”

She literally skated beyond her imagination. She answered the call of expectation by unexpectedly doing what she literally thought she could not do.

At the moment of maximum challenge she relied not solely on experience but also rose up to the level of expectation.

There is the job of civic education. Together we must develop our kids’ expectations of themselves beyond their imagination.

This is the duty we have to the youth we serve. To first demonstrate our belief in our own capacity to go beyond our experience and education.

You see, we are more than the sum of what we have learned and whom we know or what we own or where we have been. Our uniqueness lies in that unknown and unforeseen call to daring and action.

I am not suggesting that we role model lives devoid of planning and preparation. I am only suggesting that we prepare our kids to

embrace the unknown and the uncharted opportunities that will come their way in the due course of their lives.

The opportunity to change the world for the better is often right before our eyes. To have the capacity to seize that opportunity is not only a matter of good preparation; it is also the willingness to embrace the unexpected as a call to duty.

The nightmare of hurricane Katrina illustrates this very point. While the focus has been on what went wrong and what should have been done, the fact is that with absolutely no warning countless persons were instantaneously called upon to act, to literally save the lives of others, many of whom they did not know and had never met.

There was no script, no map, no guidelines just the call, the “ask not” came and they acted. Yes, they are heroes but just as important and this is crucial to my point, so too are the teachers and mentors who perhaps unknowingly had prepared them to respond when the clarion call of civic action demanded their participation and total commitment.

Civic education then can be the portal to a life of daring and action and adventure. As our Greek forbearers noted long ago; to be good is to do good. To lead a life of purpose is to be a good citizen.

If ever there was an individual who lived a committed life of civic purpose it was certainly one Giovanni di Bernardone, better known as Francis of Assisi. G.K. Chesterson wrote of him that Francis anticipated all that is most liberal and sympathetic in the modern mood; the love of nature, the love of animals; the sense of social compassion; the sense of the spiritual dangers of prosperity and even of property.

He could be presented as a humanitarian hero who was described as the morning star of the Renaissance, a troubadour of a nobler romance that chanted the love of community and nature as no other person before or after him.

Francis of Assisi had the presence of mind on this death bed to rise and give his clothes away to the person closest to him. His purpose was to leave the world as he had entered it, owning absolutely nothing. It was Francis who noted long ago;

“When you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received only what you have given: a full heart enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice and courage.”

I would suggest that these are the four pillars of civic duty, courage, sacrifice, service and love. These four pillars are only clearly understood in the context of our relationships with one another and as Francis exemplified in the totality of our relationship with the environment.

Courage is the first pillar and the most important of virtues for without it you can practice no other virtue. Courage is not just charging up the hill regardless of the odds, for most of us it is something far more subtle. It is quietly but consistently standing up for what we believe in regardless of the cost.

Courageous people hear the subtle whisper of duty more acutely than most do. The “ask not” is a chant that they can never ignore. Courage leads to a life of expectation and challenge and eschews a life in pursuit of comfort and ease.

Sacrifice is the purest form of civic action. Sacrifice, the second pillar, literally means to ‘make sacred’. Imagine if that meaning was imprinted on the minds of our youth from their earliest years.

Ultimately, nothing is more sacred than our relationships with other people. In a world in which information slides by us at double warp speed, the connections that we have to others often get put on the shelf to be dealt with later.

Issues become more important than the people the issues are centered around. If you can teach the young that relationships are sacred, you have permanently ordained a civic activist for whom in regard to the pursuit of justice tomorrow is always too late.

Truly understanding service, the third pillar, means knowing that true power emanates from the lowest seat. To serve is literally to be a slave to someone else, in the sense of Francis who always put the needs of others before his own.

Again, a word that is really only understood in the context of relationship. It is the opposite of being in control of others; it is really the root meaning of stewardship. If we could raise an entire generation of civic activists who understood this we would be bequeathing our country and its government to the finest of all generations.

Here finally is the big mystery of life, the fourth and most important pillar. When all is said and done and you are approaching your final breaths, you will not be reviewing your retirement account, listing your degrees or trying to measure the value of your life than by any other means than this;

Whom did you love and how well did you do so?

Consider the people who were trapped in those buildings on 9/11. Those who knew they were going to die communicated to others not about their stock portfolios or possessions; they communicated what was most important.

They told the most significant people in their lives how much they loved them. In the end we all will know that nothing else matters, nothing.

I would suggest that before we can live lives of daring and courage, sacrifice and commitment; service and stewardship; love and honor, for that matter, of true civic commitment we need to acquire a solid foundation.

That foundation is built upon rich and fulfilling relationships; that call us to ensure the survival of the weakest, to protect our increasingly fragile and interdependent environment; and pass on to our children a legacy of honorable civic action. We can then leave this life like Francis, knowing that we gave everything we had to those who would follow, taking nothing with us but the satisfaction of having lived a life of courage, sacrifice, service and love.

I am very confident that you who work in this field and struggle daily to discover new and imaginative ways to inspire others have dreams that still far out number your memories.

It is the energy and devotion generated by your dreams that creates the ripples of hope, which Robert Kennedy so eloquently noted in that Capetown speech, that cross each other from a million different centers of energy and daring and which build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Like Robert Kennedy's time we too live in times of danger and uncertainty. But it is also a time of great challenge and creativity.

Thank you very much for answering the call to civic duty yourselves. I am certain that the young citizens you serve can see, hear, taste, touch and smell your dedication and devotion to the

cause of building a just and free society. I know that as a result of having their lives touched by you that they will thirst for justice and hunger for action.

Let me close with the last paragraph of President Kennedy's undelivered Dallas speech which is almost in the form of a prayer as well as a challenge:

“We in this country, in this generation, are--by destiny rather than choice--the watchmen on the walls of world freedom. We ask, therefore, that we may be worthy of our power and responsibility, that we may exercise our strength with wisdom and restraint, and that we may achieve in our time and for all time the ancient vision of "peace on earth, good will toward men." That must always be our goal, and the righteousness of our cause must always underlie our strength.”

Thank you for having me here today, you have been most kind and gracious. I am very grateful and most honored to be with you.

**David Bradley
October 8, 2005**