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Civics: We're All In This Together

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There is a phrase often quoted, apocryphally, as an ancient Chinese curse: “may you live in interesting times.” Well, our times are nothing if not interesting. It can feel overwhelming for any of us who care about the welfare of our families, our homes or our society to ponder the manifold challenges we face. Moreover, that feeling only intensifies if your responsibilities extend to raising or educating a young person to become a positive force in the world.

The challenge of elevating the next generation of citizens has been met by many generations of American parents and educators. And although the issues facing our society change, the fundamentals of fruitful civic engagement remain the same. The task is to instill in young people the value of participation, the joy of working together for shared goals, and the empathy to see their neighbors’ struggles as their own. That may be a steep hill, but like all the other challenges we face, you take it one step at a time, and you do not have to do it alone.

An Early Awakening to Democracy

My first dose of civics education came in the 11th grade. For my junior and senior years, I attended an alternative public high school. It was very forward-thinking, democratically run, and perfect for kids who knew what they wanted and were willing to work for it. We made our own decisions about our classes and our curricula, and we did not take standardized tests. We even held some classes in my parents’ home in the evenings. Part of the program involved domestic exchanges, in which we would leave our comfortable suburb and trade places with kids from coal mining and farming communities in Pennsylvania and Nebraska, attending their schools and beginning to get a sense of the widening inequality around us. It was brain-opening stuff, and we loved it.

About the same time, our town’s Board of Education was taken over by a new Chair who was very conservative and very much opposed to the model of our alternative high school. She set about trying to shut us down. Suddenly we were thrown into the deep end of Democratic Participation 101—something we cared about and had a stake in was being threatened, and my classmates and I had to fight to save it. We went to war with the

Board of Education. We gave ourselves a crash course in activism and local government, learning what the process was, who made the strategic decisions, and how we could put pressure on the deciders. We went to board of education and town council meetings, we spoke up, we met with the Mayor of our town.

In the end we reached a compromise: we would take the AP tests to prove that we had actually learned something, and if we did well the Board would leave us alone. Although none of us had studied for the APs, it seemed worth the risk—after all, if we did not take the tests, they would close the school anyway. We did fine, of course, and got to keep our Alternative High School.

That was my trial-by-fire introduction to how average citizens can interact with their government. It was definitely a step up from running for student council. I learned firsthand that civics was not something dry and academic, practiced by unknown people in faraway places. Civics, and civic engagement, was about seemingly powerless people, high school kids, finding the power to fight for and get what they needed from all those foolish people in government.

Voting Is Not Enough

These days it is very rare that we actually teach civics to young people, especially in public schools. This was something that my mother always talked about (she had supported me in my high school activism). Civic engagement is not just about registering to vote when you reach 18, and occasionally making it to the polls on Election Day. It is about understanding throughout your development what it means to live in a democracy, to come together and decide as a society what the rules are going to be.

Society simply does not work without some rules that people agree to follow most of the time, and at some level kids understand this from an early age. The family is the first society children encounter. For most kids, school is probably their next experience of a society. The model of operation of these micro-societies will necessarily influence a young person's sense of how our macro-society does and should function. Nevertheless, from a child's perspective, families and schools can often seem to be top-down affairs, where rules are created by parents and teachers, and followed by students. Unfortunately, this model can sideline the most important element of our democracy—participation. Participation is not supplemental to our system; it is an integral part of the design.

For many years after I became a State Senator I ran a program called the Youth Civics Project. Over several sessions, students could learn about the legislative process, debate important issues, and even participate in a mock State Senate session. I hope they learned something of the details of how their state government works. But for me the most important lesson was about participation.

In the first minute of the first session of the Youth Civics Project, I would ask the students whether they planned on registering to vote. Most said yes, but some said no. When I asked them why not, I would usually get some variation on “it doesn’t matter because my vote doesn’t count.” Then I would ask them what issues they really cared about. Their answers ran the gamut, from graduating high school and paying for college, to avoiding a war and the potential for a draft. I informed them that as an *elected* official, what matters most is being *re-elected*; so if you don’t vote, you and your issues are irrelevant to me. It’s harsh, but accurate. Government responds to people who participate, and voting is the absolute minimum form of participation.

Just drawing the first connection between the issues they cared about, the people who have power over those issues, and the most basic way they can influence those people, I would begin to see light bulbs go off in kids’ heads. At its core, inculcating civic engagement is about giving kids the knowledge that they have the power to act on the things that matter most to them. I remember learning in school that “reading is fundamental.” Well, for our future citizens, participation is fundamental.

Schools and Civic Participation

For civic participation to take root, it must be integrated into the core curriculum that young people are offered while they are developing their relationship to the society around them. Whether this should take place in school or after school, and what form it should take in the classroom and beyond is outside my expertise. However, if students are learning about the science of climate change, for example, without also learning about the role of government and society in creating and perpetuating climate change, then the job is only half done. They may be able to explain the science, but without understanding the correlation between the facts on the ground and what can be done to influence the facts, those students will be well educated but powerless (and also pretty hopeless).

All curriculum categories should include an element of civics, because civics is already a part of them all. I am always confused when people tell

me they “don’t do politics.” Don’t they walk on the streets? Don’t they live in buildings? Don’t they breathe air? All those things, and just about every other facet of our lives, are influenced by politics and policy. Being political does not mean you have to choose a party line, or get into arguments on Facebook. It just means acknowledging that the shape of the society we all live in is dictated by the decisions we all make together. One may, of course, choose to opt out of being part of the decision-making process. However, opting out, choosing to “not be political,” letting other people make the decisions without you, is one of the most political things you can do.

Contemporary public discussions about education frequently focus on issues such as ensuring students graduate and get jobs, or creating a well-trained workforce so we can grow the economy. Those things are doubtless important, and certainly getting a job is a form of participation in society. But that isn’t all that our schools are for. The central function of schools in a democracy, whether public or private, was laid out by Thomas Jefferson when he said, “an educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people.” No less a task lies before our parents and teachers than ensuring the next generation of citizens have the knowledge they need to make decisions that will guarantee not only our survival, but also our freedom.

No One Has To Go It Alone

Of course, saving the republic from all threats foreign and domestic is a pretty hefty burden to place on our kids’ shoulders. Moreover, since kids are smart, they are not unaware of the high level of tension and fear that currently exists in our country and our world. Fortunately for them, and for all of us, they don’t have to face the task alone.

Some of the challenges of our time, like climate change, can seem impossible to solve, especially for young people. Even problems more close to home, like launching a school composting program, can be daunting if you think you have to take them on all by yourself. But you don’t, and neither do your kids (for one thing, they have you!). These days I am often asked by adults how they can get involved and make a difference. One of the first things I tell them is to join a group, or start one themselves. Activism that is socially engaging will be more effective because it is more sustainable, more enjoyable for participants, and more likely to foster creative ideas.

It’s also the only thing that has ever led to real and lasting change. American history is a story of social progress, a slow but steady march toward justice, driven by movements. From the “no taxation without

representation” movement, to the Abolitionist Movement, the Labor Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, all the way to Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and the Resistance, our nation has a proud history of people working together to make change.

It is vital that young people understand this element of our history, and know that there is a place for them in it. There are all kinds of roles that need to be played, and the way we talk to kids about how change has historically happened will shape their view about how it can happen in the future. A lot of our popular culture and myth-making glorifies the individual hero, whether it’s Captain America or Rosa Parks. But Rosa Parks did not just decide one day to be a hero; by the time she took her seat at the front of the bus in Montgomery she had long been an active member of the NAACP. She had been trained in nonviolent civil disobedience, and her famous action that launched the bus boycott was well planned. This does not in any way detract from her individual heroism, but it highlights the importance of working together. You don’t have to be Martin Luther King or Gandhi to affect change, you can start by just showing up to a meeting or talking with your friends about something you think is not right. Heck, even Captain America has a whole team back at headquarters supporting him!

Lessons from Our Founders

I represent the East Side of Manhattan in the New York State Senate, but I am going to make a plug for an attraction slightly outside of my district: the musical *Hamilton*. Unfortunately, tickets are expensive and hard to come by, although the producers have made 100,000 tickets available for \$10 to students across the country; maybe one day soon it will be made into a movie and reach a wider audience. It is a fun show for all ages, but it is also a civics lesson about democracy, how we got it, and the fact that it was flawed from day one. It is the story of a group of real individuals with real names and faces, who took it upon themselves to demand better and fight for it together. That’s the progressive history of the United States in a nutshell.

But it’s the second part of *Hamilton* that is my favorite—the hard part. The Founders won the Revolution, but now they had to figure out how to function as a country. It was complicated, the details were boring, and it seemed like they did not agree on anything. They were farmers, silversmiths, slave-owners, religious refugees. They did not have much in common, and they had to build a country with rules that were fair enough for most of the

people most of the time. They had to figure out, in spite of their differences, how to pull together and row the ship of state in roughly the same direction. In many ways they succeeded, and in many ways they failed.

Just as the Founders did, generation after generation up to the present day has had to keep reinventing the way we function as a society in spite of our differences. If young people are going to take up that mantle, we have to ensure they understand that we are part of a society, and that only by coordinating together can we determine the rules of the road that we will all follow.

Parents and schools can help build this understanding of society through lived experience, exposing students to people with different backgrounds in ways that build empathy and a sense of shared fate. Putting names and life stories to people who might otherwise only be considered as statistics, if they are considered at all, breaks down the barriers between “us” and “them.” Because in reality, there are no barriers. In the 21st century, in a world facing challenges of global proportions from climate change to terrorism to nuclear proliferation, we really are all in this together.

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