

The Challenge - Teaching Transformational Service

When President Obama recently accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, he did not see the award as recognition of past accomplishments but as, instead, an affirmation of the capacity of American leadership to shape the world toward the aspirations held by “people of all nations.” Furthermore, he said “ To be honest, I do not feel that I deserve to be in the company of so many of the transformative figures who've been honored by this prize -- men and women who've inspired me and inspired the entire world through their courageous pursuit of peace” (Oct 9, 2009).

What brings these exceptional people to do this transformational work, particularly given so many have done so through significant personal and national suffering? And, if President Obama is right when he says that Americans have the capacity to shape the world toward such significant aspirations like peace, moderating climate change, and mitigating poverty, what does this ask us, the teachers of current and future public service practitioners?

Practicing transformational service, as many Nobel laureates may tell us, requires we become what Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) calls, Cosmopolitans –global citizens connected through the responsibilities and obligations we share with others, many of whom are “strangers.” Appiah says that we achieve this connection through *conversation*, through deep connections across all the forms of identity that separate and divide us. Appiah’s perspective is similar to Hannah Arendt’s notion of “transcending judgment” (1961, p. 220). One transcends judgment by viewing each person as someone to whom one owes the moral respect to consider his or her standpoint. Transcending judgment is not the same as empathy – it does not mean emotionally assuming or accepting the point of view of others. It means thinking from the perspective of everyone else, “to listen to what the other is saying or when the voices of others are absent, to imagine to oneself a conversation with the other as a *dialogue partner*” (Benhabib, 1992, p. 137; emphasis added). Both Appiah and Arendt’s perspectives echo Benjamin Barber’s (1984) definition of citizenship in a democracy as: ...a dynamic relationship among strangers who are transformed into neighbors, whose commonality derives from *expanding consciousness* rather than *geographical proximity*. They are united by the ties of common activity and common consciousness – ties that are willed rather than given by blood or heritage or prior consensus on beliefs and that thus depend for their preservation and growth on constant commitment and ongoing political activity (p. 223; emphasis added).

Our marching orders, as teachers of transformational service, lie within Appiah’s, Arendt’s and Barber’s perspectives and are related to conversing, story-telling, situated engagement and listening. How will we identify our orders (take our orders from the situation) and put them into practice? Some of this work may be started at the 2010 Teaching Conference...

Bibliography

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