Activism at Sixty

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At sixty, you’re supposed to know what to do, but I do not. Like a teenager, I’m bewildered by distractions and obligations but, unlike a twenty-year-old, I have already made enough choices that I can’t easily take on a new persona or construct an alternative set of values. My professional focus since 1985 has been literacy education; I’m not going to start organizing for fair housing or give it all up for a roofing job. Like my younger self, every day I choose a commitment to both poetry and politics, to language at its root and people at their core. But with a confusion that is almost unequaled in other moments of my life, these days I’m unsure about how to proceed, where to apply the energies and talents I believe I have, or what will matter once I’m gone. That last question appears more prominent (and melodramatic) now than when I was thirty. As my mother remarked about her funeral: “It won’t matter to me when I’m dead.” Yet one does want to have accomplished something. I’m stepping down now from twenty years of program administration this May, hopefully to refocus myself on my city and my writing, but I’m unsure about what to do next.

The School District of Philadelphia just announced the closing of nearly forty local schools, consolidating thousands of children into newly overcrowded buildings or increasing the percent of students enrolled in charter schools. In the area surrounding Temple, where incomes are low and crime rates high, five schools are slated to be shut down and sold off. Administrators may not have much choice. As the Philadelphia Inquirer notes, the District is “perilously close to fiscal insolvency and projecting a $1 billion deficit over the next five years, with half of all children unable to read and do math at grade level.” It seems that America has lost its commitment to education, especially in neighborhoods like North Central Philadelphia.

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Urban education is a disaster that haunts my work life. I’m a university professor of English and a director of first-year writing. When I taught high school I worried about getting my students into college, but now I worry about how kids from all but the best funded districts will be able to get much from so-called higher education, even if they graduate from college. I have for years worked with School District programs and non-profits to enrich education for adults and kids in the city, but that has never been my regular job. In my role as a writing director, I’ve worked on curricula and pedagogy to make writing an accessible art for all undergraduate students. Now, however, while the demand for more rhetorically savvy writers increases, the will to educate students broadly and deeply recedes and the call to get students through quickly and cheaply grows louder. In my publications, I’ve tried to help others think across boundaries and levels about literacy education. I’ve supported community programs through grants and consultations, visited schools and neighborhood education centers as much as I could to understand the ebb and flow of reading and writing in my home region. But one person can do very little. Perhaps I’ve helped my grad and undergrad students most—after all, that’s what I get paid for—but sometimes at 3 in the morning the results seem small and the need very large. I’m not beating myself up over meager absolute numbers; actually most days I’m more or less happy with what I’ve done. But even if I put all my attention toward changing urban education K-16 in the next ten years, I’m bound to have at best a modest effect on the systemic injustices and public neglect of disenfranchised urban and rural Americans.

My communitarian side can’t help but point out that the contributions of any one individual, the measureable unit that Americans love to celebrate, will always be meager compared to the power of the whole. The heroes like M.L. King and Cesar Chavez and Harvey Milk and Bella Abzug and Shirley Chisholm did their work alongside the many, and that’s what made them both effective and beloved. In our day, when divisions seem so pronounced and the way seems fraught with righteous critique on the left and willful selfishness on the right, it’s easy to feel sorry for yourself and decide that nothing meaningful can be done by a single person or a small group. That’s wrong, but it’s tempting.

I say all this as the ground for a consideration of activism. What does it mean to be an activist, particularly if you are—for better or worse—an intellectual who’s probably best suited to talk with people about ideas? When I became politically aware, in the late sixties and early seventies, an activist was a cultural hero—MLK, Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, Abbie Hoffman, Gloria Steinem, Robin Morgan—who led large scale efforts to address problems facing groups of people, particularly disenfranchised people. Activists shaped and articulated the movements for civil rights and against war, then later for women’s or gay/lesbians’ liberation and
environmental consciousness. Today I see activism as more mundane but at least as crucial, formed by a daily orientation toward change, a sustained commitment to address peace and justice issues through collective and democratic action. An activist takes the news to heart, seeing local disasters and global threats as personal concerns. Activists aren’t comfortable just shaking their heads at the latest report, but instead they get up to improve specific conditions as best they can.

At the same time, an intellectual is someone who believes ideas have mass and volume. Intellectuals conjure with words to make change in lived experience, to open space for further productive thought. Individual authors with clarity and insight—W.E.B. Du Bois and Paulo Friere, Zora Neale Hurston and N. Scott Momaday—have widened our view of human conditions, leading to a greater perspective for activism. But there too the habit of taking ideas seriously can characterize less famous individuals working everyday to apply what they know to the world. Of course both activists and intellectuals—if they manage any self-reflection—recognize that the push toward change is long and hard, often yielding small results. Success alone can’t be why we pursue either activist or intellectual projects. You hope for the best outcome, betting that you are more right than wrong, but this in itself isn’t motive enough for your engagement with others.

I’m not leading to a religious answer. I don’t deny religion has nurtured activists I know and admire; God or spiritual principles provide the grounds for many who confront social inequities or worldly violence. For me, God melts more and more into an unnamable and non-interventionist presence immanent each day. The shadowy papa figure of my childhood offers no consolation when we face death among friends. Science unfolds cosmological mysteries that need no prime mover, but science doesn’t banish divinity as much as religious hierarchies demean the theologies they promulgate. I don’t deny my sense of awe in things, but I see no reason humans need a God to require ethical action toward other humans, nor must a king command living beings to join all others in the universal dance that they all already constitute. Many religions offer insights to us, but the bewildering and restless search for peace, freedom, justice, and beauty surpasses any particular ritualized path. No, I’m not an atheist exactly, but my activism doesn’t come from religious belief. Perhaps this is itself a Jewish stance. My friend and colleague Rabbi Rebecca Alpert says that Jewish progressive politics can be anchored in “the simple biblical exhortation ‘Justice, justice, you shall pursue’ (in Hebrew, ‘Tzedek, Tzedek Tiridof’) from the Book of Deuteronomy” (6), though she hastens to add that nothing in biblical interpretation is simple. Privately she has told me the Jewish attitude has little to do with God or even compassion: “When the world is screwed up, we need to fix it.” That resonates with me.
A year ago, two thirteen-year old girls came to talk privately with the executive director of the local literacy center where I am on the board. Tree House Books had been operating an out-of-school time literacy tutoring and arts program in the neighborhood for over five years at that point, but until then no teenage girl had told a staff member that she’d becoming pregnant and would probably leave the program. Now two announced this at once. When the director reported the situation to the board, some people were furious, others terribly upset that we had done something wrong and failed the kids and their families. Some wanted immediately to set up a new program to prevent pregnancies among the younger girls. I was sorry for the families, but I saw it as a sign of health for our organization that the girls felt comfortable enough to come to the director and confide in her. I didn’t think a separate program was what our kids needed. We needed to do our connecting work better, defining literacy as a health and welfare issue more than a “school skill,” reaching out more directly to other programs, like Planned Parenthood and local clinics, in the city. Our most crucial job is to continue nurturing the relationships we’ve initiated with our neighbors and demonstrate that literacy forms the social fabric that allows people to feel they belong to one another. I’m sure we can’t “fix” the state of the world, but we can do everything possible to be present and responsive to the complex problems we find here.

My greatest disappointment in a community-based learning course came when I was teaching at a Catholic university and my students were tutoring once a week at a maximum-security prison not far from the school. One of the students, I’ll call her Kate, was a very religious person but also quite naïve about the world outside of her suburban home. She entered the class as one of our most enthusiastic tutors, bound to save some man who had made bad decisions in his life. Unfortunately, through the luck of the draw and a mistake in the screening at the prison, Kate was paired with a guy who really did not wish her well. He played all sorts of mind games on her, undercutting the lessons she brought each week and talking to her triumphantly about sex and the underlife he’d lived. She become more and more afraid of him each week, but never told me until she came to me in tears about a third of the way through the semester. She claimed he had destroyed her faith in human beings and violated her trust in him. We asked him to leave our program immediately, but she was inconsolable. Now she felt the course was a terrible mistake and that all men in prison should be left to rot there because they had committed terrible crimes and deserved their sentences and more. I devoted most of a class period to her description of the situation and the fears this man had stirred in her, feeling that we all needed to see that our project didn’t always run smoothly and that hatred and duplicity were also a part of the drama we had entered. I had never been attacked before by students on the left in my time at the school, but after class four students I was very close to stayed to berate me for allowing Kate the time and space to rant.
They only saw her racism and gave her very little sympathy. Even a feminist analysis didn’t move them because her politics were so conservative. I still don’t think I did anything wrong with that debriefing, but I probably should have recognized the situation sooner and intervened more quickly. Kate withdrew from the course soon afterward, and I’m afraid she took with her a very angry attitude toward incarcerated people, the opposite of what I had hoped students would get from the course.

Why am I telling these stories? Because I think activism is messy, not heroic. Because I believe engagement with difficult situations cannot be ideologically pure or morally without considerable risk. We take on the regular, thankless work of organizing a community against a gas rate hike or reaching greater clarity about school reform, despite the likelihood of only modest success of any project, because we all experience both individual ambition and collective identity. Any action that comes from only one or the other source is ultimately incomplete. We need to hear news from the most secret precincts of human intimacy as well as the broader wisdom borne of unsettling public controversy. Activism makes sense because it’s rooted both in the private desire for freedom and the public desire for solidarity.

This brings me to the question of poetry. What is the relationship between poetry—or any of the arts—and politics? Must we either put the arts in service of political causes or separate them out as elitist aestheticism? This seems like an impossibly old-fashioned question, reminiscent of Depression Era Popular Front arts or the formalism of critic Clement Greenberg in the 40’s and 50’s. Yet it sticks with us like jam on cold toast. If we are going to get beyond the art/politics split in writing, we have to accept what Steve Parks calls the “hybridity of voice” (17). He locates the need to speak out and be heard in the “dual desire” in writers “to create a sense of individual identity within traditions” as well as “to place that voice within traditions of collective action” (17-18). Any writer is alone in what she creates, but she also composes within a discourse tradition, a historical moment, and a political identity linking her to others by heritage, gender, sexual orientation, class, and other social groupings. Setting aside these considerations for literary figures, Parks focuses on what this hybridity means for young people, union members, people in the disabled community, parents of children in failing schools, anyone who wants a hearing but finds the way to voice barred by circumstance and privilege. We need to tap all the resources available to open up the way for increasingly disenfranchised social classes to participate in the democratic process.

Perhaps the most valuable training I’ve received for work in community settings was not from Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Myles Horton, Pierre Bourdieu, or Karl Marx. My life reading and writing poetry has taught me about facing irresolvable and inexplicable situations, navigating supra-logical and emotionally charged discourse,
and accepting outcomes that could neither be predicted nor rationalized away. Imaginary and lived experience meld in poetic language that is not so much aesthetic as visceral, composed over centuries yet perceived in the nick of time. Adrienne Rich uses Dr. Williams’ famous lines from “Asphodel” as an epigraph to her volume of essays on poetry and politics:

It is difficult

to get the news from poems

yet men die miserably every day

for lack

of what is found there. (Williams, 318)

Williams’ words have perhaps been quoted too often, and “die miserably” may sound too melodramatic for this wired ironic age, though I still find the lines compelling within his poem. Rich herself, in that same book, reflects: “What is political activism, anyway? I’ve been asking myself. It’s something both prepared for and spontaneous—like making poetry” (17). Later on she redefines the mandate for poets of the time: “The question for a North American poet is how to bear witness to a reality from which the public—and maybe part of the poet—wants, or is persuaded it wants, to turn away” (115). Rich calls poets to account in many memorable phrases in What Is Found There, but the impression I take most from her is the commitment to be present, to bear witness, to compose at the edge of the shared moment in her capacity both as an individual and a member of a gathering of those willing to be held responsible for injustices as they occur. This is Parks’ “hybridity” in a different key.

I have never been political in Rich’s more stringent category, that of revolutionary poet. Nor am I the appropriate age to rap, slam, or tweet. I have tended to see politics in the range of language stitched together in poems or the way wonder and urgency constitute more than personal longing at the edge of a poetic line that resists paraphrase. I want to speak in verse out of what I experience and where I am in the culture. As Ron Silliman has usefully observed about the political basis of all poetry: “The writer cannot organize her desires for writing without some vision of the world toward which one hopes to work, and without having some concept of how literature might participate in such a future” (59). Because I have not myself lived under direct oppression, I could not pretend to evoke such power in loss as Mahmoud Darwish, speaking of his early childhood exile from Palestine: “Still too young, you could not imagine your own death. You did not yet grasp that children too could die. But how to go alone toward an unfamiliar life, in an unfamiliar place. That dilemma, burying you mercilessly beneath a heavy sky, made you weep” (42). I have hoped to save overt political language for work involving
social movements or actions directly, trying to find the right poetic register for my
own intimations of injustice where I don’t presume to speak for others.

For my purposes now, I want to linger on Rich’s phrase, “both prepared for and
spontaneous.” A poet, like an activist, must continually absorb breaking news,
discourses from many environments, perspectives foreign and domestic or ancient
and futuristic. However, no amount of training can prepare the poet for the exacting
nature of any given moment. I don’t mean the moment of inspiration, which is too
often a fabricated state, designed to scare away anyone who fears the daily demands
of creating. I mean the crazy emergence or unique breath in the instantaneous now,
which new verse must shape and reflect. An organizer can attend workshops or train
on the job, but developing issues for each distinct social group will have their own
raw constellation of factors. Every new human drama unfolds with a distinct cast,
even if many of the players were involved in an early time. The poet forges lines
from dream, conversational fragments, wordless song, video reports as well as she or
he can to make poems for the present. Spontaneity may require revision, sampling,
group process, remixing, or self-parody, but at some point you just have to make shit
up. I was at a party the other night where young people were freestyling hip-hop
verses to previously recorded beats. That was preparation enacted spontaneously,
and the moment felt both festive and political. Creation demands that wisdom,
laughter, and pain supersede expertise at the point of making.

In any case, I don’t know what to do next. Notice I haven’t touched on the
running debate among many activists in community literacy that pits tactical against
strategic orientations. I find the controversy mostly unproductive. Steve Parks
rightly notes that when the two of us worked together on New City Writing projects
in the late 90’s, we got into the most trouble when we tried to join a reform
movement within the larger institution of the Philadelphia School District (64). He
calls his approach “edge politics,” an amalgam of strategic and tactical action
motivated by “the need to ground our literacy work within a core of primary
community partnerships” but that also challenges “the state’s ability to coerce
conformity” (67). I would add that we tended to do best when we chose projects
with partners we liked, people in a school or a neighborhood or an organization we
felt we could trust over time. In short, I pursue projects with people I think might
become friends through shared work, or at the very least I hope we could agree on a
vision of the results we’d like to see. This may sound intuitive and provisional, but it
serves as well or better than any other method of choosing sites for actions.

As I release myself more and more from university demands, I can’t tell if I
should focus on a particular school that is having some success, widen my
conversations with other after school programs in the city, or support teachers and
principals through initiatives with regional college writing teachers. I keep coming back to the idea that we need a vehicle for greater collaboration between neighborhoods and universities to solve intractable problems such as student persistence and parental involvement. I know whatever I do will involve collaboration with people whose work I admire. At the same time, I want to leave myself time to write and think, a luxury that people don’t often have but a necessity if you believe ideas and art contribute to dawning realities. My wife and I are soon leaving our usual positions to teach abroad for a few months, and when we return I imagine ourselves living and working in a freer way—whatever that might mean—than we have for the last twenty years. John Dewey warned long ago that standard ideas about school stand in the way of meaningful education. Perhaps I’ve allowed institutions to shape my vocation long enough. In any case, it seems to me, the hybrid languages of poetry and action speak to the person as well as the collective about shared work yet to do.
Works Cited


