The Ivory Tower, Apathy, and the Art of Citizenship

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"Education, if it is real and not a sham, is a releasing, not an imprisoning, thing." So insisted Robertson Davies, the Canadian man of letters, in a speech to university graduates in 1962. Davies admonished his audience against the deadliest of the Seven Deadly Sins, *acedia*—which translates as "sloth," but which more accurately means a disinterest in living an engaged life. The contemporary resonance remains striking, although we might again translate the word for our times, four decades later, to "apathy." Preparation against the apathetic life is, I will venture in this essay, one of the most important things we can teach our students in the short time they spend with us. It does not matter if we teach at technical schools or research ones, land grant universities or private colleges: apathy lurks in the hearts of students in American society, and a thoughtful educator seeks to weed it out.

Let us juxtapose, at least for the moment, the apathetic life with the democratic life. This is not an injudicious stretch of the imagination. The former comes easily, especially when we are socialized to embrace a consumerism predicated on buying easy solutions to life's many problems. The latter takes time, involvement, and a willingness to participate in something larger than oneself. A robustly democratic existence demands commitment and practice, and like any artistic endeavor, skill, or achievement, incubates in activities that may initially seem unrelated to the goal. Classroom encounters and interactions between students, teachers, and administrators are good examples of such things that on the surface appear to have little to do with practice in the democratic, but which are, upon closer inspection, profoundly important rehearsals for future behavior.

The question of education and democratic citizenship is certainly not new. In the Western world, it is at least as old as the debate between Plato and Isocrates, and in America it manifested in a particularly poignant debate between Walter Lippman and John Dewey in the early twentieth century. Indeed, it seems every generation faces the crossroads of whether to teach a people to become "the people" or to promote an elite who may efficiently rule the many. In 2004, this debate followed an interesting twist during a divisive election year. Stanley Fish, for example, argued emphatically in a *New*

York Times editorial that it is not the business of universities to fashion citizens, while David Horowitz 's controversial "Academic Bill of Rights" proposed a central mission of higher education to help students "become creative individuals and productive citizens of a pluralistic democracy." Other leftists disagreed with Fish, and other conservatives rejected Horowitz's call.

There is more to this than a perennial debate between various shades of progressives and conservatives, however, and if we shift the discussion away from the often hyperbolic tensions that divide so-called red states from blue states to one that challenges a plague of apathy, we may find a common ground for productive care of students regardless of our differing ideological and political commitments. Notably, neither Fish nor Horowitz defined "citizenship," although both seemed to convey something along the lines of "political activists," people committed to advance certain causes and ideologies. Perhaps ironically, the 1999 Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education, which called directly for schools to promote active citizenship, is similarly bereft of an explanation of precisely what a citizen looks like.

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This ambiguity is problematic because it leaves all of us in the proverbial trenches fighting for or against something that we might not recognize if it actually occurred. Let us here, then, consider the possible meanings of this word "citizenship" and its relation to educational experience. In doing so, we may take recourse to the ancient Greeks and juxtapose it with idiocy. Our term "idiot" derives from the Greek word for a private person, for someone who had the means to participate in the public but chose not to, who was unlearned in the art of public life. Understood thusly, the apathetic life is one of *idiocy*. And a spirited education is a cure for idiocy in all its manifestations.

To be a citizen is to not be an idiot. Teasing the implications out further, I would argue that citizenship is comprised of an appreciation of oneself as a nexus of several experiences. First, a recognition that one is a political being, whose judgments and actions create consequences for others living in the material world. Second, that one is an intellectual, broadly understood, who may learn, support, change, and challenge one's opinions. Third, that one is an educator, who models for others how to live in this world. Fourth, that one is a rhetorician, who has available the means to engage others, please them, persuade them, and even tempt them, but whose emotional and symbolic resources hold ethical implications. Fifth, that one is a critic, who may or may not uphold the system of the world as one finds it, and may do something about it by raising one's voice in dissent. More than the sum of their parts, these five identities forge a sense of willingness to risk participation in public judgment, the very foundation of democratic living.

This working definition does not preclude more formalized definitions of progressive or conservative activism, but also does not rely upon them. Instead, it hopefully stands in opposition to apathy and clears a path by which we may now consider the role of higher education in this process, regardless of the kind of school a student attends or the major she or he adopts. Woven into this definition is both a call for teachers to help students become responsible for their education and participation in public and a suggestion that we take as the highest pedagogical achievement those times when our students disagree with us, when they have learned enough to distinguish what is helpful in their development and then respectfully show us the door. This is the sign of apathy abandoned, and of our job well done, and of a democratic attitude and engaged citizenship taking root.

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How, then, to counter apathy and foster citizenship? Let me respond with a deceptively simple answer. We educators must demonstrate to our students as often as possible their worth as students and as human beings. In practice, of course, this demands tremendous dedication from us in order to foster a similar dedication in our students. And it is imperative to show this dedication to every student, not merely those who exhibit traditionally smart or skillful traits. To uphold a single model for success in higher education is to plant apathy in those who do not conform to an arbitrary standard. We teachers must remember first and foremost, therefore, that our classrooms are stages for a wide cast of characters: the charming fox who gets in trouble just to find a way out, the silent perfectionist on the fast track to an ulcer, the all-too-serious savior growing old too young, the working class kid rough-around-the-edges but willing to say something. If we show admiration for rather than discipline the risks they take, we may find that they surprise us with ingenuities.

Apathy is, after all, a typical solution for those who find no pleasure in work and who have no regard for their humanity. Both work and humanity require practice to thrive, and an education that stresses apprenticeship rather than discipline is the most salient means to provide this to students. That was Dewey's point, which stands the tests of time and criticism: a public must learn how to govern itself, but not simply in the formal sense of following rules for governance. Rather, participants in a healthy public must learn and practice activities with others, through which we may both develop critical faculties and learn to disagree but still manage to live together. All social institutions have a role to play in this apprenticeship, but educational systems are particularly important by virtue of their overt attention to socialization and intellectual maturation. In other words, the behaviors within the classroom—not just the information—ripple outward into society and models for engagement within the classroom encourage models for engagement outside it.

Let us consider in some detail these two elements in the campaign against apathy, work, and humanity. I pull no punches here: we must encourage students to work, although not for the sake of busyness. It is important that we choose our words carefully here. I avoid the term “labor” for two reasons. First, to nod in appreciation to Hannah Arendt’s distinction between work and labor in *The Human Condition*. Second, to assure that I am not taking aim at students pursuing jobs and careers, or even business proper (as taught in schools of management). It is important to distinguish between work and busyness, however, since American education is increasingly colonized to provide training for the latter but not an appreciation for the former. Busyness occupies, but work transforms. An ethic of work celebrates the dedication necessary to seek challenges and the fortitude necessary to meet them. An ethic of busyness only requires having things to do and meeting prescribed tasks. And therein lies the challenge of all educators: we can ask students to be busy in the classroom or we can ask them to work.

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To keep people busy is to keep them away from pondering the quality of their lives, making demanding judgments, and socializing with others—three activities that inform robust democratic citizenship. To encourage work is to call people to action in a creative process that achieves a different state of awareness or material conditions. Hence it is important to teach in work—that is, to explain the reasons behind doing something rather than simply assigning it. Such an attitude also requires that we teachers show students we are working too, both inside and outside the classroom. Assignments for the sake of assignments are joyless, if not downright oppressive. Assignments that are provided time for explanation, discussion, examples, debate, and alteration provide opportunities for genuine response. Lectures unfold within similar expectations. The sealed lecture that permits no disagreement or student involvement replicates a mind-body dualism that is the bedrock of paternalism. It may influence students and make busybodies, but likely will not call many of them to work for something important for a sustained period of time.

An appreciation for work encourages students to become responsible for their own education and to themselves rather than the approval of others. The consumerist culture they come from asks them to be silent, just as many of the paths they take after higher education will offer to pay them for obedience. We can encourage or discourage this practice. To discourage it does not mean a loss of authority or a failure to teach the fundamentals of form and knowledge of any given discipline, but it does impinge upon the teacher to encourage a risky innovation instead of routine, the predecessor to apathy. For if we simply teach routines to students, we can produce an “educated” labor force, but only along the lines of those well-educated chickens who, as the critic

Kenneth Burke once lamented, learned efficiently to come to the bell even when it called them to the slaughter.

Practically speaking, there are many ways of encouraging an appreciation for work rather than busyness in the classroom. First, it is appropriate to remind students that the ideas before them are difficult, but may be achieved. Map out how a class relates to a complete education and life outside the Ivory Tower and students will understand the context much more deeply than if made to feel they are there without reason. It is likewise helpful to explain overtly that an education is not just about a job upon graduation, but also about how to enjoy that job, reap its rewards, and know when to get out of it—that is, a model of engagement with what one does for a living rather than strictly how to do something. This is no easy task, especially for over-burdened teachers stitching together a career in an age of freezing hires, cutbacks, and increased demands (to say nothing of those who teach at several community colleges just to make ends meet), but the benefits of this kind of leveling with students is manifold.

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Second, it is important not to over-occupy students. Ask yourself: did you get into this profession to give countless pop quizzes or for the love of ideas and material that delighted you? Nothing breeds bitterness more quickly among undergraduates than a sense of instability in the classroom wrought by a threat of arbitrariness and constant monitoring. Fewer assignments do not necessarily mean less education. Third, involve everyone in the classroom if possible, not simply those naturally inclined to the discipline. Certain students will become angry over this level of expectation, especially those already given in to apathy and self-centeredness—a good teacher needs a thick skin and no lack of stomach—but most can be won over by slow degrees. Fourth, know when to get in and when to get out. Older professors need the good sense to hand the reigns of the department—and the introductory classes—over to the younger ones, and the younger ones need to practice a patience that comes from valuing their older, engaged colleagues.

Finally, do not demand perfection from students, but recall there is much learning—and wisdom—in earnest mistakes. In this manner, we teachers can practice a kind of friendship with students: a friendship of apprenticeship. This last recommendation may be the most important for the development of an attitude that counters apathy and lays the ground for healthy democratic citizenship. Engaging student mistakes (and our own) intimately connects the idea of teaching an appreciation for work with humanizing the educational experience. It understands that higher education is not just an opportunity for intellectual and technical maturity, but also for emotional and ethical growth—which, of course, is fundamental for engaged citizenship. Allow me to offer a representative story from my own undergraduate experience that speaks to this concern.

When I was an eighteen-year-old freshman playing grown-up, I made the interesting judgment to move in with a girlfriend. We fought constantly, in a manner marked by my profound immaturity and self-centeredness. One day, in a show of utter disregard during an altercation, I allowed our young dog to escape the house. He returned days later, dead, wrapped loosely in a black garbage bag. The absurdity of his fate crushed me, and awoken me to an urgency of character that in time prevented youthful aggression from developing into hostility or cynicism. Still in shock, I contacted a professor in whose class an exam loomed, and petitioned for a few days' reprieve. He refused on the grounds that he could not verify I had any real affection for the dog. At the time this act compounded my grief exponentially.

I didn't do well on the exam. The professor, however, in turn did something unheard of and offered the entire class an opportunity to retake it to improve one's grade. I refused to do so. At the time it felt like charity come too late, and it would have put me in the company of those students who measured their worth by dedication to a high GPA for the sake of a high GPA. The year ended in stalemate about this. But when the final grade came, I received an A. The professor simply ignored that exam and took into account my other work. It was, quite frankly, one of the most decent things a person has ever done for me.

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A decade later, I don't recall much of the specific material from that class—although staccato memories erupt at times in the most unusual circumstances, and I can laugh at how unnecessarily anxious youth become over grades. And now that I stand in his shoes, weighing student petitions for leniency and having heard of countless grandparents dying around exams, I appreciate what a difficult decision he had to make. What strikes me as most impressive a decade later is, however, how he modeled for me an ethic of work that correlated with an ethic of decency. He explained the reasons for his actions, and he continued to debate the meaning of fairness in the specific context. That he treated me as a human being—and therefore ran the risk of exposing his own humanity—is a lesson that stayed, and ultimately encouraged me to stand against the apathetic life and appreciate the labor of weighing equitable judgments.

Don't get me wrong. I know there are countless students out there who would rob us blind, abuse every gesture of kindness, and snicker at us for getting away with it. They are the same students who talk non-stop in the back of the lecture hall or buy the notes instead of attending class. Indeed, the self-centered and apathetic easily mistake decency for weakness. But if we conduct ourselves in the classroom only to guard against grotesque violations, we might miss the opportunity to help the student who

earnestly needs a break. Put frankly, we set our hopes too low if we aim to police rather than inspire. Jyl Felman, bell hooks, Ira Shor, Donald Finkel, and other performance-savvy pedagogues remind us that the classroom may become a place of profound transformation if we encourage students to embrace their own voices. I would add that the classroom—any eclassroom—also always serves as a model for living, and fosters either a *vita activa*, an active life, or a *taedium vitae*, a weariness of it.

Punishment for mistakes is not always the best way to help students mature. The strangest things matter to undergraduates, just as they do to the rest of us. If we teachers show an appreciation for their world, they will likely respond with equal fervor. This is how we might best equip our students for the future. The opportunity to consider mistakes and respond to them without severe punishment provides a context for maturation and a kind of judgment that is the aim of public life and citizenship. Trust in one's own judgment, an activated desire to participate in judgment, and a willingness to do the work necessary to meet and respond to judgments: these are the intellectual and emotional components that nourish the citizenship outlined above, in complete opposition to an apathy that asks people to want to do nothing. A classroom, as a space set apart from the "real world" but still connected to it, is precisely the place where students may learn this art of judgment, and it falls upon us teachers to aid their apprenticeship.

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Together, then, the opportunity to work and to be human within a classroom counters apathy (which asks students to do neither) and encourages democratic citizenship, broadly defined as a kind of active life. It hardly matters if the classroom is in a school of technology, science, business, education, social science, or humanities. Imparting skills and information is fundamental for productive educational experiences, but it is not the only thing taught in a classroom. How material is taught is as important to the undergraduate as what is taught, not only for the initial interest but for sustained engagement. Put simply, education echoes in more than one way. To ask students to learn an appreciation for work in whatever exercise they ask for, to challenge them to the core, and to remember they are human provides a response to the challenge that Emerson offered us in "The American Scholar," in which he wrote that institutes of higher learning only show their worth when they "aim not to drill, but to create."

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