

Journey to Civic Engagement

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Frankly, my teaching civic engagement is not “innovative.” Many of my pedagogies I inherited with my own teachers and co-instructors – from whom I have learned tremendously. In a broader sense, I am quite aware of the larger discourse surrounding civic education and engagement, and know that I am part of a community of thought and practice reaching back in substantially similar form to the 18th and 19th centuries. Nonetheless, I have been deliberate, and my activities are the result not only of my education but also of my life experience.

My parents were Methodists, and pursued a virtuous life within their roles at home and work. They certainly understood the importance of the civic and political realms, having scraped through the Great Depression and the New Deal as teenagers in families of modest means. But participation—beyond voting in the messy and worldly realm of politics—was perhaps “beneath” them. (A connection to nature, however, was explicit and encouraged. For my mother, that meant a strong humane ethic; for my father, a fascination in wild nature. That made it easy to be an ‘animal kid’; much later, my dissertation work expresses a sort of synthesis between my mother’s work as a high school English literature teacher, and my father’s nature photography, in my examination of the importance of animals in early childhood development.) As a junior in high school, I was alarmed that Seattle City Light wanted to raise Ross Dam on the Skagit River another 110 feet, flooding waterfalls, canyons, wetlands, deer habitat, and giant cedars I had come to love through canoeing on the existing lake. I had no hope there was anything I could do about it. But a friend mentioned a public hearing—she must have been the daughter of Sierra Club members or something—and suggested I go and speak. I studied up, wrote a statement, and testified about what I knew first-hand before a board in a room packed with grown-ups. In the end, the dam was not raised, not due to public opposition, though it surely played a role.

The spirit of civics grew on me. Certainly the civic culture of Seattle in the 1960’s and 1970’s were factors, as well as my Scouting leaders. Indeed one Scoutmaster unknowingly encouraged my strong young biocentrism by declaring old growth stands his ‘cathedrals,’ and taking us to the wilderness very frequently.

But for the one major turning point I have my alma mater—now the institution I serve—to thank: Western Washington University. I transferred from the UW School of Forestry to Huxley College in 1978. Not only did I gain great teachers for professors, I also acquired classmates from around the country who brought powerful civic backgrounds as well as strong identification with nature. Together we organized cooperative houses and a bulk food purchasing group that lasted years. We wrote letters for numerous environmental campaigns (some large some small; some successful some not). We used the AS system to bring change on campus. We did service projects in our neighborhoods. We organized the “Commuter Cyclist Union” which led to the Mayor creating the Bellingham Bicycle Advisory Committee & appointing me as chair (it is

still in existence under a modified name). We studied social movement history. I completed a legislative internship with the Sierra Club's Washington DC office, arranged by one of my Huxley profs, Ruth Weiner.

Community organizing extended into my years as a graduate student in Chicago, where I helped start and expand a system of student coop houses, and got involved in neighborhood affairs across racial lines. Nine years at the University of Chicago (drawn out partly by all those extra activities) gave me a fairly tough intellectual edge. But in my teaching I have found it most effective to meet students where they are, which is, it turns out, not all that different than where I was back in 1978. As Huxley students we had been inspired by professors who connected abstract ideas with the affairs of the day; and who enabled our aspirations with the skills we needed to make a difference as educators, scientists, or policy makers.

Now my grad school pals are mostly other professors. But many of my college classmates have gone on to make distinguished practical contributions—to change landscapes and habits of the heart where they dwell. We were fueled by shared passions to *understand* and to *do what we could* to help the environmental “commons,” humanity's original shared stage of civic drama. It is an even fuller stage today, and learning to live harmoniously with each other and with other species is of paramount necessity. And I know that bringing my students right onto that stage is a very effective and essential way to teach to the heart, hand, and mind.