



ASPEN LEADERS
ACTION
FORUM

MINI-SEMINAR SESSION READINGS

Readings for Wednesday, July 31, 2013

“ENGAGING THE WORLD”



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Citizenship in a Republic

By Theodore Roosevelt

Today I shall speak to you on the subject of individual citizenship, the one subject of vital importance to you, my hearers, and to me and my countrymen, because you and we are great citizens of great democratic republics. A democratic republic such as ours - an effort to realize in its full sense government by, of, and for the people - represents the most gigantic of all possible social experiments, the one fraught with great responsibilities alike for good and evil. The success of republics like yours and like ours means the glory, and our failure of despair, of mankind; and for you and for us the question of the quality of the individual citizen is supreme. Under other forms of government, under the rule of one man or very few men, the quality of the leaders is all-important. If, under such governments, the quality of the rulers is high enough, then the nations for generations lead a brilliant career, and add substantially to the sum of world achievement, no matter how low the quality of average citizen; because the average citizen is an almost negligible quantity in working out the final results of that type of national greatness. But with you and us the case is different. With you here, and with us in my own home, in the long run, success or failure will be conditioned upon the way in which the average man, the average women, does his or her duty, first in the ordinary, every-day affairs of life, and next in those great occasional crises which call for heroic virtues. The average citizen must be a good citizen if our republics are to succeed. The stream will not permanently rise higher than the main source; and the main source of national power and national greatness is found in the average citizenship of the nation. Therefore it behooves us to do our best to see that the standard of the average citizen is kept high; and the average cannot be kept high unless the standard of the leaders is very much higher.

It is well if a large proportion of the leaders in any republic, in any democracy, are, as a matter of course, drawn from the classes represented in this audience to-day; but only provided that those classes possess the gifts of sympathy with plain people and of devotion to great ideals. You and those like you have received special advantages; you have all of you had the opportunity for mental training; many of you have had leisure; most of you have had a chance for enjoyment of life far greater than comes to the majority of your fellows. To you and your kind much has been given, and from you much should be expected. Yet there are certain failings against which it is especially incumbent that both men of trained and cultivated intellect, and men of inherited wealth and position should especially guard themselves, because to these failings they are especially liable; and if yielded to, their- your- chances of useful service are at an end. Let the man of learning, the man of lettered leisure, beware of that queer and cheap temptation to pose to himself and to others as a cynic, as the man who has outgrown emotions and beliefs, the man to whom good and evil are as one. The poorest way to face life is to face it with a sneer. There are many men who feel a kind of twisted pride in cynicism; there are many who confine themselves to criticism of the way others do what they themselves dare not even attempt. There is no more unhealthy being, no man less worthy of respect, than he who either really holds, or feigns to hold, an attitude of sneering disbelief toward all that is great and lofty, whether in achievement or in that noble effort which, even if it fails, comes to second achievement. A cynical habit of thought and speech, a readiness to criticize work which the critic

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himself never tries to perform, an intellectual aloofness which will not accept contact with life's realities - all these are marks, not as the possessor would fain to think, of superiority but of weakness. They mark the men unfit to bear their part painfully in the stern strife of living, who seek, in the affection of contempt for the achievements of others, to hide from others and from themselves in their own weakness. The role is easy; there is none easier, save only the role of the man who sneers alike at both criticism and performance.

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat. Shame on the man of cultivated taste who permits refinement to develop into fastidiousness that unfits him for doing the rough work of a workaday world. Among the free peoples who govern themselves there is but a small field of usefulness open for the men of cloistered life who shrink from contact with their fellows. Still less room is there for those who deride of slight what is done by those who actually bear the brunt of the day; nor yet for those others who always profess that they would like to take action, if only the conditions of life were not exactly what they actually are. The man who does nothing cuts the same sordid figure in the pages of history, whether he be a cynic, or fop, or voluptuary. There is little use for the being whose tepid soul knows nothing of great and generous emotion, of the high pride, the stern belief, the lofty enthusiasm, of the men who quell the storm and ride the thunder. Well for these men if they succeed; well also, though not so well, if they fail, given only that they have nobly ventured, and have put forth all their heart and strength. It is war-worn Hotspur, spent with hard fighting, he of the many errors and valiant end, over whose memory we love to linger, not over the memory of the young lord who "but for the vile guns would have been a valiant soldier."

Character must show itself in the man's performance both of the duty he owes himself and of the duty he owes the state. The man's foremost duty is owed to himself and his family; and he can do this duty only by earning money, by providing what is essential to material well-being; it is only after this has been done that he can hope to build a higher superstructure on the solid material foundation; it is only after this has been done that he can help in his movements for the general well-being. He must pull his own weight first, and only after this can his surplus strength be of use to the general public. It is not good to excite that bitter laughter which expresses contempt; and contempt is what we feel for the being whose enthusiasm to benefit mankind is such that he is a burden to those nearest him; who wishes to do great things for humanity in the abstract, but who cannot keep his wife in comfort or educate his children.

Nevertheless, while laying all stress on this point, while not merely acknowledging but insisting upon the fact that there must be a basis of material well-being for the individual as for the nation, let us with equal emphasis insist that this material well-being represents nothing but the foundation, and that the foundation, though indispensable, is worthless unless upon it is raised the superstructure of a higher life. That is why I decline to recognize the mere multimillionaire, the man of mere wealth, as an asset of value to any country; and especially as not an asset to my own country. If he has earned or uses his wealth in a way that makes him a

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real benefit, of real use- and such is often the case- why, then he does become an asset of real worth. But it is the way in which it has been earned or used, and not the mere fact of wealth, that entitles him to the credit. There is need in business, as in most other forms of human activity, of the great guiding intelligences. Their places cannot be supplied by any number of lesser
5 intelligences. It is a good thing that they should have ample recognition, ample reward. But we must not transfer our admiration to the reward instead of to the deed rewarded; and if what should be the reward exists without the service having been rendered, then admiration will only come from those who are mean of soul. The truth is that, after a certain measure of tangible material success or reward has been achieved, the question of increasing it becomes of constantly
10 less importance compared to the other things that can be done in life. It is a bad thing for a nation to raise and to admire a false standard of success; and there can be no falser standard than that set by the deification of material well-being in and for itself. But the man who, having far surpassed the limits of providing for the wants; both of the body and mind, of himself and of those depending upon him, then piles up a great fortune, for the acquisition or retention of which he
15 returns no corresponding benefit to the nation as a whole, should himself be made to feel that, so far from being desirable, he is an unworthy, citizen of the community: that he is to be neither admired nor envied; that his right-thinking fellow countrymen put him low in the scale of citizenship, and leave him to be consoled by the admiration of those whose level of purpose is even lower than his own.

20 My position as regards the moneyed interests can be put in a few words. In every civilized society property rights must be carefully safeguarded; ordinarily, and in the great majority of cases, human rights and property rights are fundamentally and in the long run identical; but when it clearly appears that there is a real conflict between them, human rights must have the upper hand, for property belongs to man and not man to property. In fact, it is
25 essential to good citizenship clearly to understand that there are certain qualities which we in a democracy are prone to admire in and of themselves, which ought by rights to be judged admirable or the reverse solely from the standpoint of the use made of them. Foremost among these I should include two very distinct gifts - the gift of money-making and the gift of oratory. Money-making, the money touch I have spoken of above. It is a quality which in a moderate
30 degree is essential. It may be useful when developed to a very great degree, but only if accompanied and controlled by other qualities; and without such control the possessor tends to develop into one of the least attractive types produced by a modern industrial democracy. So it is with the orator. It is highly desirable that a leader of opinion in democracy should be able to state his views clearly and convincingly. But all that the oratory can do of value to the community is
35 enable the man thus to explain himself; if it enables the orator to put false values on things, it merely makes him power for mischief. Some excellent public servants have not that gift at all, and must merely rely on their deeds to speak for them; and unless oratory does represent genuine conviction based on good common sense and able to be translated into efficient performance, then the better the oratory the greater the damage to the public it deceives. Indeed, it is a sign of
40 marked political weakness in any commonwealth if the people tend to be carried away by mere oratory, if they tend to value words in and for themselves, as divorced from the deeds for which they are supposed to stand. The phrase-maker, the phrase-monger, the ready talker, however great his power, whose speech does not make for courage, sobriety, and right understanding, is simply a noxious element in the body politic, and it speaks ill for the public if he has influence
45 over them. To admire the gift of oratory without regard to the moral quality behind the gift is to do wrong to the republic.

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The citizen must have high ideals, and yet he must be able to achieve them in practical fashion. No permanent good comes from aspirations so lofty that they have grown fantastic and have become impossible and indeed undesirable to realize. The impractical visionary is far less often the guide and precursor than he is the embittered foe of the real reformer, of the man who, with stumblings and shortcoming, yet does in some shape, in practical fashion, give effect to the hopes and desires of those who strive for better things. Woe to the empty phrase-maker, to the empty idealist, who, instead of making ready the ground for the man of action, turns against him when he appears and hampers him when he does work! Moreover, the preacher of ideals must remember how sorry and contemptible is the figure which he will cut, how great the damage that he will do, if he does not himself, in his own life, strive measurably to realize the ideals that he preaches for others. Let him remember also that the worth of the ideal must be largely determined by the success with which it can in practice be realized. We should abhor the so-called "practical" men whose practicality assumes the shape of that peculiar baseness which finds its expression in disbelief in morality and decency, in disregard of high standards of living and conduct. Such a creature is the worst enemy of the body of politic. But only less desirable as a citizen is his nominal opponent and real ally, the man of fantastic vision who makes the impossible better forever the enemy of the possible good.

The Small Work in The Great Work¹

By Victoria Safford²

In his book On the Rez, Ian Frazier tells a story about South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation. In the fall of 1988, the Pine Ridge girls' basketball team played an away game in Lead, South Dakota. It was one of those times when the host gym was dense with anti-Indian hostility. Lead fans waved food stamps, yelling fake Indian war cries and epithets like "squaw" and "gut-eater." Usually, the Pine Ridge girls made their entrances according to height, led by the tallest seniors. When they hesitated to face the hostile crowd, a fourteen-year-old freshman named SuAnne offered to go first. She surprised her teammates and silenced the crowd by performing the Lakota shawl dance and then singing in Lakota—"graceful and modest and show-offy all at the same time," in Frazier's words. She managed to reverse the crowd's hostility—until they even cheered and applauded. "Of course, Pine Ridge went on to win the game."

Here's another story of daring, of the meeting of our passion and the world's great hunger for justice: Thirty years ago, to march in the streets of this city, or any city, as a gay man or a lesbian, openly, must have taken wild courage, incredible courage, outrageous imagination. Those who were there will tell us, "Well, courage yes. And certainly imagination. But there was more. . . ." They will tell us that once you have glimpsed the world as it might be, as it ought to be, as it's going to be (however that vision appears to you), it is impossible to live compliant and complacent anymore in the world as it is.

To march was a dangerous risk— but not to was a risk of another kind— of living half-dead, with no name, unremembered, in the dark, surviving on scraps and crumbs and the outright threats and pious ultimatums of the hate-filled present moment. Why not risk all that, and walk out into the sun in the summer and walk around in the world as it ought to be, thereby bringing it to bear? Why not march and carry on, act out, act up, as if your life depended on it?...

...And so you come out and walk out and march, the way a flower comes out and blooms, because it has no other calling. It has no other work. I have seen and you have seen and maybe you have been among those who have had to march in terror, on pain of dire consequences. People have marched with paper bags on their heads to guard their lives and livelihoods—teachers, police officers, neighbors, tenants, daycare providers, clergy. People took such risks, but still they were there and they still are, and we are so grateful. To march was dangerous. It

¹ Excerpted from Leob, Paul, The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear (Perseus, 2007), Chapter 22.

² The Reverend Victoria Safford is the minister of White Bear Unitarian Church, in Mahtomedi, Minnesota, and the author of Walking Toward Morning (Skinner House, 2003). See www.unitarian.org/whitebear. Ian Frazier's wonderful Pine Ridge story can be found in his On the Rez (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000; Picador USA, 2003).

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still is. Not to march was dangerous— it still is now, and more so; let there be no question. This is no time for quietism.

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5 I am interested in what Seamus Heaney calls the meeting point of hope and history, where what has happened is met by what we make of it. What has happened is met midstream by people who are— among the multitude of things we are— spiritual beings and all that that implies of creativity, imagination, crazy wisdom, ancient wisdom, passionate compassion, selfless courage, and radical reverence for life. And love— for one another absolutely, and that
10 love that rises out of us, for something larger than ourselves, call it what you will. I am interested in the place, the places, where history is met by the hope of the human soul, life’s longing for itself. I am interested in hope on this side of the grave— for me there is no other kind— and in that tidal wave of justice that could rise up if only we would let it.

15 Six months after 9/ 11, our Unitarian church had a little evening forum. People were invited simply to share with one another how they were feeling. That was the only agenda and assignment, that small yet huge question; and at least for the first of the two hours, we hoped to live within its discipline. We hoped not to barrel right away into all those noisy Unitarian Universalist opinions, all those articles they’re reading in The Nation and The Progressive, the
20 New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, those Web sites that they’ve found, the commentaries that they’ve heard on NPR (some of which they’ve no doubt written), the positions they’re defending so ably on the op-ed page, and of course the persistently wobbly but heartfelt agenda of the underfunded Social Action Committee. We knew we’d get to all that eventually, but we didn’t want to go there right away. Instead we hoped to cast a different kind
25 of circle, within and out of which people could rise to the holy occasion of hearing one another, of beholding one another. It was a gathering for prayer.

It was a lucky night. The circle held. When anybody wandered off or lost their way in the dry sands of rhetoric or opinion, the circle gently called them back, so thirsty were these people to
30 connect with one another and with something antecedent in themselves, something original, essential, deep. There were maybe twenty people— high school students, an eight-two-year-old member, and everybody in between. It was not long before they left off speaking about September 11, that particular, precise disaster, and began to talk instead and cogently about September 10, the mutilated world we’d known before but maybe had not seen so clearly, which
35 is in fact the world we live in now, the world of Frederick Buechner’s “great hunger,” this insatiable, desperate hunger for transformation, which begs not just for our flickering attention, but for our sustained, directed passion.

Sorrow flowed into the room, like a river. Rage, decades old— or new and young and raw, straight out of the awesome youth group— stormed into the circle. Silence made its holy way.
40 And now these were dangerous waters— and as we spoke and heard each other, inevitably we paddled close that night to the deadly shores of cynicism and despondency (which in some communions is a sin). Then someone in the circle, with more presence of mind than I could muster in the moment, saved us all from drowning, saying: “You know we cannot do this all at
45 once. But every day offers every one of us little invitations for resistance, and you make your own responses.” I wrote it down, right then, because this person is prone to neither social

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activism nor religious language, of any kind, but it was he who said, “It is a sacred offering, the invitation to resistance, and every day you make your own responses.”

5 He mentioned that story from Pine Ridge, which he’d heard not long before in a Sunday-morning service, and he said, “You know, that little girl changed the world out there in South Dakota, and I know it because hearing her story has changed me, and ever since I heard it (and I wish I hadn’t heard it), I’m moved to do things which I never would have done. I couldn’t see the way. Or wouldn’t.” He talked about how at his job, in a large corporate setting where he’s some kind of manager, he had placed a four-inch American flag upside down on the outside of
10 his cubicle, because he feels his country is in desperate trouble, that its soul is in trouble, that its soul is sick. “I guess it’s like my shawl dance,” he said— so humbly, so quietly, but with trembling conviction. And we were grateful and amazed.

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15 We stand where we will stand, on little plots of ground, where we are maybe “called” to stand (though who knows what that means?)— in our congregations, classrooms, offices, factories, in fields of lettuces and apricots, in hospitals, in prisons (on both sides, at various times, of the gates), in streets, in community groups. And it is sacred ground if we would honor it, if we
20 would bring to it a blessing of sacrifice and risk, just as the floor of any gym in South Dakota might suddenly be sanctified by one child, one young woman’s dancing and her song (ancient, holy), the interior clarity of her spirit, that spoke there to the hatefilled world, and transformed that place with faith and deep remembering.

25 Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope— not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through); nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna be all right.” But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul
30 first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people what they see.