

Engagement in Civic Work as Spiritual Development: An Interview with Thomas Ehrlich

By Thomas Ehrlich

As a well-known author and educator, Ehrlich connects his lifelong commitment to civic and political engagement to supporting college students' spiritual development. By contributing to one's community and serving in various capacities, Ehrlich upholds that civic involvement transcends the individual, allowing one to become part of something larger – even spiritual. He emphasizes the importance of providing structured opportunities to become engaged in civic work during the college years in order to create a culture of service and civic commitment, promoting an engaged citizenry for our democracy. Ehrlich also discusses various challenges and opportunities facing our higher education system related to engaging in civic work.

Please describe your personal and professional experiences with regard to service learning and civic engagement that led to your current involvements.

I come to these issues at age 75 with a deep commitment to civic work, a commitment that has been much enriched by the wisdom of Sandy and Lena Astin. Their extraordinary contributions have helped propel civic work to the center stage of American higher education.

During my career, I have been involved in public service a number of times. I came to work in the State Department on "Cuba Monday" – the start of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 – as a special assistant to the Legal Adviser, and continued there as a special assistant to Under Secretary George W. Ball. I came back to Washington in 1975 as the first president of the Legal Services Corporation, which supports civil legal help for poor people; and in 1978, after President Carter had been elected, I was appointed as the first director of the International Cooperation Development Agency, reporting directly to the President, with responsibility for bilateral and multilateral foreign-aid policy.

When I was not working in the government, I was a professor and then Dean of Stanford Law School, then provost of the University of Pennsylvania, and subsequently President of Indiana University. During this time I was also a member – and then Chair – of the Commission on National and Community Service and a board member of the Corporation on National and Community Service.

As Dean at Stanford Law School, I began to see how much poor people need legal services, and this realization led me to seek the presidency of the Legal Service Corporation. Through my work there, I realized that this need could not be met unless private attorneys gave some of their time and talent *pro bono* to help the poor with their legal problems. Yet I was met by much resistance based on private lawyers' unwillingness to work in poor communities because they never had interacted with people of different economic backgrounds and races other than their own. This experience convinced me that it was important for young people to have structured opportunities to engage in civic affairs and reflect on these experiences while in college.

My daughter introduced me to Campus Compact in the mid-1980s just after it was founded. And when I became President of Indiana University, I joined the Campus Compact Board, later serving as Chair of the Board. The organization was founded by a few college presidents as a way to promote student community service and to counteract the self-centered image of the "me generation." But by the early 1990s, we realized in Campus Compact that there was a need to link community service with academic study in order to be taken seriously by students and faculty. It was at this time that service-learning grew increasingly popular and was promoted and encouraged within higher education. In subsequent years, we focused more directly on "service learning for what?" and this led to civic engagement as a prime goal. More recently, I have been emphasizing the sub-set of civic engagement that concerns public policy-making and politics.

I started working at the Carnegie Foundation after retiring from Indiana University and then teaching community-service learning courses in the Cal State system for five years. My interest in civic and political engagement led to my book, *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*¹, which was followed by *Educating Citizens*² and then *Educating for Democracy*³, the last two written with colleagues at the Carnegie Foundation. More recently, I have become involved in the American Democracy Project⁴, a multi-campus initiative focused on higher education's role in preparing the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for our democracy. This Project is sponsored by a collaboration among the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Carnegie Foundation, and *The New York Times*. Through this work, I began listening to young people across the country about their own visions for civic and political engagement and discussing the lessons they learned from their service. This project connects directly to my most recent book, *Educating for Democracy*.

My current work is examining how colleges and universities with undergraduate business majors – currently the largest major in the country – can ensure that their business students gain a strong liberal education. Unfortunately, nationally, business students, along with engineering students and students in some other vocational fields are among the least civically engaged after graduation. My Carnegie Foundation colleagues and I think that a strong liberal education can help promote civic responsibility and engagement. I am also currently working on a short book about why young people should be engaged in public service as a vocation or an avocation.

Describe the connection between spirituality and civic engagement and the significance of this work to our American system of higher education and democracy.

In my own view, spirituality connects to the desire to be part of something larger than oneself, which I believe is built into our human DNA. Many of the experiences students have while in college reinforce this desire to build a good life, one in which their work, personal, and civic lives are part of a larger community. While spirituality is often defined in terms of religion, it doesn't have to be religious. Whether spirituality is expressed in terms of organized religion or not is less important than holding a deep *sense of community*, one in which students realize that focusing only on oneself in a narrow, materialistic sense is not enough – it is not a life well lived. Engaging in civic work and bettering one's community allows students to learn and grow through experiences that are part of being *truly human* and also *deeply spiritual*.

We know from research and scholarship that development occurs at an accelerated rate during times of transition, and college is one such time when traditional-aged students are growing into young adulthood. For this reason, the college years are also a time of significant identity formation. Many students have important learning experiences in college when they are part of a larger community and can learn from others who are different than themselves. These experiences can be very empowering and eye opening because students have the opportunity to encounter other perspectives and experiences that broaden their worldview. All of these experiences play critical roles in shaping young adult identity as students begin to form links beyond themselves that often can be seen or expressed as spiritual.

Structured opportunities for learning and reflection within our institutions of higher education help create the desire within students to become *lifelong learners* as they develop a deeper sense of self, identity, and spirituality. And all of these involvement opportunities help show students that there are many paths to spirituality, while developing as civically-minded citizens that are willing and able to participate in our democracy during college and after graduation.

As Provost of the University of Pennsylvania and President of Indiana University, I saw over and over that small-group experiences are essential for student success, particularly on large campuses. Often, those experiences are sponsored by faith-based organizations such as the Newman Society or the Hillel Center. Whether or not this is the case, the focus of those experiences is frequently some kinds of civic activities. Students are helping others and, in the process, they are not only engaged but empowered. They come to understand that they can make a difference in the lives of others and in their communities.

Through this process, the trajectories of their lives are often shifted so that civic service to others and to their communities becomes integral parts of who they are and how they chose to live their lives. When they become involved in civic service it is rarely with the thought that this will be a pathway in a search for meaning and purpose. But that is precisely what, time and time again, I have witnessed happen to students. They realize only after they are well along that path how fortunate they are.

What is the greatest challenge and greatest opportunity facing higher education as it relates to the connection between spirituality and civic engagement?

Currently, every campus is consumed by economics issues, and our present recession only intensifies these issues. We are also seeing college students – and even faculty and staff – becoming more and more consumed by the very practical issues of getting a job, paying the rent or mortgage, feeding their families, and trying to ride out these tough financial times. Too often, this situation leaves little time and resources for staying involved and connected to the larger community – even though this is one of the most important times that civic engagement is needed in our society. Fortunately, the Internet is opening up all sorts of ways to be engaged in civic work, and provides many ways to stay connected and engaged.

Another challenge is how best to help students develop their own civic and political identities while in college. Too often, faculty focus exclusively on preparing their students to be dispassionate analysts and critical, skeptical observers in order to develop students' critical thinking skills. In the process, these faculty may also lose sight of the value of helping students develop their own spiritual identity.

A key challenge is addressing students' frustration about the lack of change as a result of their civic service. Often the issues involved in civic work are so large that students begin to wonder "Is this really worth it? Are we really making a difference? Why am I really doing this?" These negative and doubting reactions can stop them from moving forward and staying committed to important work. These feelings that cause students to question or struggle, however, can also be some of life's greatest teaching tools, providing educators with opportunities to help students process their experiences and support them through these challenges, set backs, or even failures, so they can grow stronger and more committed.

Learning to experience the *joy* of engagement in civic, community, or political work and to gain *pleasure* from participation – as opposed to becoming discouraged by slow-moving change – is the larger opportunity that we have when these dark days come. As educators and leaders in civic engagement, we need to talk to students about these feelings before they emerge, while teaching and modeling taking pleasure and joy from being involved for the sake of being part of something greater than ourselves in order to foster a deeper, spiritual experience.

Additionally, structuring programs so students can realize the impact of their service and civic work is important when addressing these bigger-picture issues in order to validate and appreciate the efforts they are investing as they become more engaged. This type of support helps students feel a stronger investment in their work, while building the confidence and belief that their efforts matter and do make a difference in our world. All of these experiences provide students with an opportunity to consider what they really care about as they create patterns of service and civic-engagement work during the college years.

Looking back on our past efforts, we haven't been nearly as successful as I would like us to be in ensuring that our democracy is effective, and a key way to do better is to develop civic engaged graduates from our colleges and universities. On a positive note, the new administration of President-elect Obama offers a major set of potential opportunities to move forward because he is advocating a highly interactive and participatory democracy in our country. I hope that our colleges and universities are wise enough to take maximum advantage of this.

Thomas Ehrlich is a Senior Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation and co-directs the Political Engagement Project and the Business, Entrepreneurship, and Liberal Learning project. He has previously served as President of Indiana University, Provost of the University of Pennsylvania, and Dean of Stanford Law School. He was also the first President of the Legal Services Corporation in Washington, DC, and the first director of the International Development Cooperation Agency, reporting to President Carter. Before coming to the Carnegie Foundation, he was a Distinguished University Scholar at California State University and taught regularly at San Francisco State University. He is author, co-author, or editor of 12 books, including Higher Education and Civic Responsibility (2000), Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility (2003), Reconnecting Education and Foundations: Turning Good Intentions into Educational Capital (2007), and Educating for Democracy: Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement (2007). He is a trustee of Mills College, and has been a trustee of the University of Pennsylvania and Bennett College. He is a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Law School and holds five honorary degrees.

References

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- ⁴ American Democracy Project. Retrieved from <http://www.aascu.org/programs/adp>