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Mediating Disconnected Communities with a Liberal Arts Education

Written by Jennifer Redmond

In the midst of an Indianapolis evening, nothing makes you more aware of your surroundings than the homeless on 38th street, or the police vehicles blocking the road on your way home. Whatever the cause of this chaos, you will most likely find out on tonight's news. Yet, nothing makes you feel small like all of these issues overwhelming the sidewalks around you, and nothing makes you feel more relieved than knowing you can safely breeze by them in your car. It is these day-to-day scenes that are analyzed and statistically configured into textbooks and *newspaper* articles at schools, businesses, and non-profit organizations. But if, as Henry David Thoreau once said, "A truly good book teaches me better than to read it. I must soon lay it down, and commence living on its hint. What I began by reading, I must finish by acting," then perhaps all understanding of the world begins with the fundamental steps of reading and then experiencing. And that is exactly what I learned from reading *Gang Leader for a Day* by Sudhir Venkatesh.

Vankatesh, a graduate sociology student, was assigned the mundane task of gathering data about impoverished neighborhoods via a multiple-choice survey. However, he turned numbers into faces by risking his life every day, getting to know people rather than focusing on data. Over the course of ten years, Vankatesh became friends with the leader of a crack-dealing gang, lived with inhabitants of the Chicago housing projects, and learned undisclosed information about the inner workings of a community so often deemed an "urban war zone." In short, Vankatesh became not only a student of sociology, but an activist wanting to identify with the "subjects" too often depicted in the context of empirical statistics, not as human beings. His approach revolutionized how students of the liberal arts gather information within fields such as sociology.

Four years at Butler University has taught me two important lessons about activism. These lessons, which are similar to Vankatesh's philosophy, show how liberal arts students are trained to enter into debate with "the facts" and blaze new trails to find their own answers. First, learning is more about questioning than acquiring knowledge. Knowledge may be the key to finding similarities between cultures, communities, and individuals, but a curious outlook is necessary to becoming an active participant. Butler is a special place because it is a cultural smorgasbord: there are foreign language classes, global and historical studies, a diversity center, and students engaged in philanthropy. With such an outlook, one can't help but realize people are meshed together by a universal connection to understanding and improving the human condition. Secondly, through the discussions so typical in Butler classes, I have learned that the liberal democracy in which we live allows us the freedom to write, speak, or advocate for anything we choose. This being said,

perhaps the reason so many people feel disconnected from today's current events is due to a lack of broad-mindedness that comes from knowledge. Such a deficit allows democratic freedoms to be taken for granted.

Service-learning has opened my eyes to new opportunities for activism. Before I came to Butler my idea of an activist was someone who was properly trained, had a specific political goal in mind, was either "pro" or "anti" establishment, and was not tolerant to others' point of view. In the fall of my senior year at Butler, I joined Back on My Feet¹ and found myself wanting to know the stories behind people so desperate for a new start. As I ran and engaged in dialogue with these people, I did not consider myself an activist because my fellow runners were my friends. Despite our different backgrounds, educations, ethnicities, or religions, reaching the finish line is what we had in common. As I helped others improve their life, I improved mine as well.

Prior to Butler, I would not have had the capacity or background knowledge to understand the issues behind homelessness, drug abuse, and recovery. Yet, because of the variety of classes I took (involving discussion and/or service-learning), I was able to feel compassion toward what we, as a society, often see or hear about only through the media. Perhaps another reason we feel so disconnected lies in the media's tendency to overload us with data. Data disconnects us from the reality of life and produces an illusion. For activism to exist compassionate human interaction is required. No sense of obligation will lead the true activist to bring about the desired change. And, admittedly, without personally engaging in the circumstances it is hard to feel compelled by the issues brought up in newspapers, television, the radio, or books.

Events such as the Occupy movement, "right-to-work" rallies, abortion debates, and environmental protests beg for a public response. Yet, despite the fact that not everyone is an activist, the media insist that we react rather than think during tumultuous times. As a liberal arts student, however, I feel I have a strong sense of guidance when it comes to engaging with local and global societies and economies. During historic crossroads the imagination, creativity, and criticism of a liberal arts education are pertinent to limiting the disconnect.

When I reflect on the matters addressed in this essay, I am reminded of Shakespeare's words, "All the world's a stage." The media reaffirm this every day, yet this is not the reality. As the audience watches the show, a liberal arts student sees the inner workings behind the curtain. And although media constantly changes in order to grab our attention, the liberal arts will always be a way to extract the unprejudiced truth from the world in which we live.

¹ a non-profit organization that helps homeless veterans or drug abuse victims overcome challenges by running.