

2015

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Singh Gill, Rahuldeep (2015) "Grinding for the Common Good and Getting Roasted," *Intersections*: Vol. 2015: No. 42, Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2015/iss42/7>

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Grinding for the Common Good and Getting Roasted



Last spring, *USA TODAY* reported on a venture that it was taking on alongside the world's great coffee company:

Starbucks, in partnership with *USA TODAY*, is about to tackle the issue of race in America.

This week, baristas at 12,000 Starbucks locations nationally will try to spark customer conversation on the topic of race by writing two words on customer cups: Race Together. Also, a special "Race Together" newspaper supplement, co-authored by Starbucks and *USA TODAY*, will appear in *USA TODAY* print editions beginning Friday, March 20. It also will be distributed at Starbucks stores.

Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz is on a mission to encourage Starbucks customers and employees to discuss race, under the firm belief that it's a critical first step toward confronting—and solving—racial issues as a nation. It is scheduled to be a key topic at the java giant's annual meeting on Wednesday.

"Racial diversity is the story of America, our triumphs as well as our faults," says the opening letter to the

eight-page supplement and conversation guide, signed by Schultz and Larry Kramer, president and publisher of *USA TODAY*. "Yet racial inequality is not a topic we readily discuss. It's time to start." (Horowitz)

Only three days later, *The New York Times* ran a very different story about the same topic:

Howard D. Schultz, the chief executive of Starbucks, said in a letter to employees on Sunday that baristas would no longer be encouraged to write the phrase "Race Together" on customers' coffee cups, drawing to a close a widely derided component of the company's plan to promote a discussion on racial issues.

"While there has been criticism of the initiative — and I know this hasn't been easy for any of you—let me assure you that we didn't expect universal praise," Mr. Schultz wrote. (Somaiya)

Well, so much for that.

As someone who strives to work for the common good, but also enjoys the humor of everyday life, the Starbucks example tears at me. Ultimately, I have to appreciate the daring naivety with which the company surged into the stormy waters of race relations in America with the bold energy of a freshly brewed cup of Pike Place

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Roast. If you're going to get involved with Grande-sized conversations about the common good, aren't you going to need to be ready to err boldly? To look like a fool?

Missional Commitments

When we work for a goal as big as the "common good," don't we risk looking like those suits in the Starbucks boardroom drawing up the "Race Together" game plan? In hindsight, I'm sure the Starbucks folks can see how naive they were. What they thought was a good idea was certainly bold, certainly unconventional.

How many ways have we on college campuses felt totally abandoned by others on our quest to serve the common good? How many RSVPs have gone unfulfilled? How many campus conversations ended with doors slamming? How many times have we been left at the interfaith altar, having planned a grand feast for hundreds of folks who never showed up? Think of all the programming funds and speaker fees wasted!

And yet meeting these challenges head-on is why I have enjoyed teaching at a liberal arts college, and especially why I love teaching at an ELCA school. We take the education of the whole person seriously. Moreover, I have used the concept of vocation to articulate why my scholarship and research matter as academic exercises, and why it is vital that the university support my quest for knowledge. In this way, I get to model for my students what my interpretation of the "life of the mind" looks like. Reminding myself that I am modeling this for them helps me take care to be responsible to my own self-care and cultivate my curiosity.

I plug vocation into the "common good" in a few different ways as a professor in an ELCA Religion department. For us at Cal Lutheran, our commitment to Interfaith Cooperation is something that emerges out of our Lutheran identity. In my first-year Religion class, we read the memoir of Interfaith Youth Core founder Eboo Patel, called *Acts of Faith*. Using this book as a model, we connect it to our own lives by delving into a genre of writing spiritual autobiographies. It requires students to imagine the story that they have and bring to the study of religion, and to their interactions with other folks who orient around faith differently than they do.

The Vocation of the Lutheran College Conference itself embodies the missional commitment that ELCA

institutions have to this quest. I have recently learned that the Second World War helped to raise awareness that Lutherans engaged in a kind of ethnic separatism in the American context. I have been told that the ELCA hosts the Vocation of a Lutheran Conference to investigate and invigorate the church's shared identity and mission. I hear often that "serving the neighbor" is the Lutheran "calling". One way the ELCA accomplishes this services is to make opportunities for excellent higher education available to a broad constituency. Creating leaders for a global society, developing whole persons, and being responsible servants to a complex world are part and parcel of what we do. Our mission and identity statements remind us where we are headed and why we do our jobs.

Lines of Difference and the Common Good

But on particularly difficult days, often deep into the semester, these missional commitments can taunt us like the naive smiles of well-meaning baristas. This is to be expected, because working for the common good is messy. You might muck it up. It might require you to be vulnerable and to put more on the line than you thought you signed up for.

Somehow, in the midst of those moments of vertigo from the whirlwind of vulnerability, we have to remind each other that *work* for the common good is common to us all. We have to stop playing hero-ball and remember to pass. We can lean back against solidarity and collegiality.

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Donors may call in to endowment offices to complain that the Religion Department is full of non-Lutherans, or that interfaith understanding is watering down a proper Christian ethos. But as I take on the mantle of vocation, such stakeholders have to contend with the truth in the following aphorism: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."¹

We need to go far, and we need to be in this together, across lines of difference. Just from recent news, here is a rudimentary list of issues staring the common good in the face right now: race relations in America; mass incarceration (who gets incarcerated, for what, and how long?); women in science; responsibilities of nations to people forced to leave their homelands; nuclear proliferation; border disputes; mental health treatment; the disproportional impacts of global warming on the poor; educational priorities (should we focus on STEM or on reading, writing, and thinking?); and even what we might call “vocational” priorities (should we focus on reading, writing, and thinking and/or on the formation of good people who care about the earth?).

The list could go on. But whatever list one makes, there is no one position on any of these items that fits a “common” understanding of the problem. There are different visions of the common good rooted in differing value systems. What is more, any one particular vision sits at a number of different intersections of our identities. You know these well: race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, partisan affiliation, regional differences, geography, and so forth.

In the search for the common good, we have to resist the rush to conclude that these differences somehow do not matter. They do matter, and very much. All of these aspects of our identities impact how any of us come down on any one issue in relation to the common good. Each of us comes with different gifts, different talents, and different stories. The big news about the common good is that there may be nothing “common” about this “good.” And that’s why striving for “it” is messy. And that’s why our work is necessary.

Re-Storying our Campuses

From Martin Marty’s *The One and the Many: America’s Struggle for the Common Good*, I learned about the “porcupine’s dilemma,” or “hedgehog’s dilemma,” which is often associated with philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. A metaphor for civil society, the story tells of the struggle of a group of porcupines that huddle to find warmth on a winter’s day. As they get closer to find warmth, their sharp quills poke one another. This drives them far apart.

They try again, and the same happens. After a while of huddling and running away, they find a distance from each other where they could just be warm enough without the danger of getting poked by a neighbor’s quills. Like the porcupines, we social human beings learn to keep our distance from one another, just enough to still enjoy the benefits of social interaction. Some call this “politeness.”

Is this the best we can hope for? Are we to keep just enough distance to not prick each other? That cannot be our highest aspiration. Which is why I love how Marty ends his book with a passage that is as relevant today as in the 1990s when it was written:

The trauma in the body politic, the civil network, the social organism, continues. But in the meantime, and for the sake of a longer future, *every story well told, well heard, and creatively enacted will contribute to the common good* and make possible the deepening of values, virtues, and conversation. At the outset I described this book as an effort to contribute to the restoration of the body politic, or, with the many groups in view, the bodies politic. We have been speaking throughout of the “re-storying” of the republic and its associations. The advice for every citizen who wishes to participate in American life and its necessary arguments: start associating, telling, hearing, and keep talking. (Marty 225, emphasis added)

Re-storying our campuses is a great opportunity because great stories are particular: they speak *to* individuals because they speak *for* individuals. And if stories get told and retold, it’s because there’s

“What stories of preparing students to work for the common good would you tell from your campus?”

something common and human about them. What stories of preparing students to work for the common good would you tell from your campus?

Maybe your mind goes first to a certain exceptional student on your campus. Maybe she gets great grades

while leading the Amnesty International student club and building houses with Habitat for Humanity on the weekends. Great. Turn your attention also, though, to the blasé student. The one you meet at lunchtime at the cafeteria, who has skipped your class for the day and is digging into all-he-can-eat lucky charms at 1:30 PM in the afternoon in flip flops and flannel pajamas. How do we get him psyched on the common good?

Equipping students on our campuses to struggle for the common good happens in ordinary moments in our offices, classrooms, dorms, cafeterias, and chapels. We cannot take for granted that there is anything common, which is to say ordinary, about the common good. We cannot take for granted that our extraordinary dreams are going to fit into the ordinary aspirations of our Lucky Charms-eating, morning class-skipping students.

I remember the first semester I taught at Cal Lutheran, when a rather forgettable student in my global religions class who was a pastor's daughter came to me bearing triumphant news. "Dr. Gill, I just wanted to thank you for this class. I was scared about it at first, but it's made me stronger in my faith." In the moment, green out of my public and secular graduate school program as I was, I couldn't comprehend what she could have possibly meant. Frankly, I was miffed! The class wasn't about "her faith." It was about religion, globalization, and how to study both. But as I have become more experienced, I understand better what she meant. Whereas once the diversity of

worldviews made her fear for her own security in her faith, she had been able to face that diversity in the course, and still loved her own tradition. It was a victory to celebrate.

With both shrewdness and naiveté, let us design experiences that allow students to wake up to the larger question of a shared humanity. Let us design experiences by which our students can come to understand what the common good means to them. To do this, we might even have to be vulnerable enough to abandon some pre-conceived outcomes.

If that seems too daunting to tackle, liberate yourself with one final idea: achieving the common good is not *our* vocation as faculty, administration, and staff of ELCA colleges and universities. *Our* vocation simply calls us to invite this generation of students to imagine and realize what their approach to a common good might be.

As I have meditated on these issues, I have found a new vocation: speaking and writing about purpose, meaning, diversity, and pluralism. I now speak on campuses and in workplaces about why we need to engage across boundaries, and how it is actually good for the bottom line. We can better engage the common good (of our organizations, our teams, our businesses) when we reach deep into our own stories and our motivations. Together, we can help create a society that is more engaged with itself, whose members take care of each other as a way to understand one another.

Endnotes

1. I am fortunate to be reminded of these words from time to time by my colleague and interfaith expert Dr. Colleen Windham-Hughes.

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