

Hope, History, and Reclaiming Citizenship



By Robert Munro

Middlesex School, Concord, MA

As I write this on the 4th of July, I'm reminded of Frederick Douglass' powerful speech, "To what is the 4th of July to the Negro." In the speech, which was given on July 5th, 1852, to a group of abolitionists, Douglass laments the commemoration of the nation's founding as falsely claiming that it is a celebration for all Americans. Not unlike today, he sees an America divided, unable to share in a collective sense of identity. "Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us...the Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn" (Douglass 1852). Douglass goes on to both inspire and challenge his audience and all abolitionists, to remain steadfast in their convictions, active in their fight for the abolition of slavery, and, above all, resolute in their duties as citizens. It is a speech that is often read on the 4th of July by historical societies and African American museums, alongside the Declaration of Independence, to serve as a juxtaposition. This one speech, which should be required reading for all United States history students, in my opinion, embraces the very essence of the values we so desperately need more of in our society today: hope, an appreciation of the study of history and the skills it teaches us, and a reclamation of our rights and responsibilities as citizens in a civil and multicultural society.

Part of teaching the discipline of history is helping students understand how the past reinforces what we see happening today, and how we interpret contemporary moments vis-à-vis our own experiences. Much of the political, social, and (un)ethical occurrences we are witnessing today, through the news and, increasingly, filtered through social media, is depressing, uninspiring, and simply volatile.

Continues on page 12

Continued from page 11

One of the exceptions to this current state of affairs that gripped me this summer was an event from Thailand. I was wondering to myself why the story about 12 boys and their soccer coach, who were trapped in a cave for 12 days and defied all odds to survive, occupied so much of our global imagination and attention. Surely, and unfortunately, tragic events like this happen with great frequency around the world and have throughout history. So what was it that inspired me to follow this event as the team's rescue unfolded? The answer is hope and our desperate desire for us to experience and cultivate it during a time when the rhetoric and actions we see online and in the world offer so little hope. How can we educate our students to not only analyze these events effectively, but to also let these moments inspire them to make a difference in their communities? How can we educate our students to both look for hope throughout history today and use it to respect differences and embrace a multicultural and empathetic approach to citizenship?

History students are taught a number of skills. It is important for students to know the facts of history. They need to know dates. They need to know significant figures. They need to know movements and major events. Equally as important is the complexity of historical occurrences together. Wayne Journell notes that skills like historical evaluation and interpretation are "most effective when students can share and analyze historical information with their peers" (Journell 14). He draws the connection between this activity and civic engagement

by mentioning the significance of students deliberating about the pluralistic nature of historical perspectives:

Being exposed to diverse historical narratives is an important step in acclimating students to diverse ideologies, but they must also learn how to communicate with others, even those with whom they disagree. A classroom that allows for the public sharing of opinions and beliefs creates opportunities for students to engage in civil conversations, an art that students may not practice at home and rarely see modeled on television. Finally, deliberation fosters tolerance, which may be the most important lesson needed to live in a pluralistic society in which multiple historical narratives are widely accepted as part of popular culture. (Journell 18)

The learning of history and historical skills is, no doubt, an important primer for early and active citizenship—it works best in classrooms that have a diversity of identities and ideas. The hope is that, through brave and compassionate conversation, facilitated by the teacher,

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every student feels empowered to share his or her perspective and opinions on history. Even if no explicit civic education is being taught in the history classroom, the mirroring of active engagement, civil discourse, and empathy for different ideologies will, ultimately, prove beneficial for students' development as citizens in a diverse society.

The concept of citizenship in American history is a complex issue to understand, despite its egalitarian promise. Rogers M. Smith notes that, historically, to be an American citizen, "a person did not have to be of any particular national, linguistic, religious, or ethnic background. All he had to do was to commit himself to the political ideology centered on the abstract ideals of liberty, equality, and republicanism. Thus the universalist ideological character of American nationality meant that it was open to anyone who willed to become an American." (Smith 1999) This is what we believe the colonists had in mind, abstractly, when they drafted the early nation's documents. However, despite these lofty ideals, many of the nation's most violent legislation and moments (see Dred Scott v. Sanford, the Civil War, Plessy v. Ferguson, Korematsu v. United States, Indian Removal Act, Stonewall riot, to name a small number) revolved around the issue of the concrete denial of citizenship. With this in mind, it's easy for history students to look at history as a long chain of exclusion and inequality. This is all the more true for our students of underrepresented groups (students of color, economically marginalized students,

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women, students who identify as LGBTQ, and international students). Instead, what I stress throughout my history courses is the necessity for students to approach the study of history through a multicultural lens with critical analysis and empathy. These perspectives require that students do the hard work of uncovering the facts of the historical moments and combine that with a careful and compassionate frame of mind as they consider the "whys" and the "hows" that not only led to those moments, but, more importantly, to the movements, battles, and triumphs that were inspired by the unequal and unfair historical events. History is filled with examples from around the world where citizens became activists and helped to mobilize meaningful and inclusive change (Reconstruction amendments, Brown v. Board of Education I + II, 20th Amendment, decolonization, Roe v. Wade, again, to name a very small number).

By studying these powerful and positive outcomes and learning about those dedicated and brave people who have

Continues on page 14

Continued from page 13

fought for their rights as citizens, history students can take heart in the idea that through active citizenship, even if it was, at first denied to those activists, difficult and brave conversations can begin, messages of inclusion and hope can be spread, and injustices can be rectified. It is imperative that students take an interest in helping their communities and begin advocating for injustice where they see it, but the hope, perhaps is found less in the outcome and more in the process of collective empowerment through the intellectual journey for shared values based on human rights.

At Middlesex School we are supplementing the work students are doing in United States history and civics with a course explicitly geared toward helping them become more responsible citizens. We created a course called *Citizenship in Civil Societies*. This eight-week course meets once a week and runs parallel with the first eight weeks of United States history course required of all juniors. The rationale was to give students another opportunity to do some close reading and have some vibrant discussion around the concept of citizenship and how significant it was to the formative generations of this country. Although the initial focus of this course is on the United States, the last half of the course broadens the scope of what it means to be a citizen around the world and virtually. We believe this is important given the increasing global diversity of our student body, the relationship between our students and their digital lives, as well as the dynamic nature of the world they'll step into after high school.

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To wrap up and tie history, hope, and citizenship together, I want to return to Douglass, as I found powerful (and yet eerily apropos of the zeitgeist of our time) the sentiment expressed in the following passage:

America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery in the great sin and shame of America! “I will not equivocate; I will not excuse”; I will use the severest language I can command; and yet not one word shall escape me that any man, whose judgment is not blinded by prejudice, or who is not at heart a slaveholder, shall not confess to be right and just. (Douglass 1852)



The study of history has the power to galvanize the hearts and civic spirits of our students. Personal politics notwithstanding, it is the responsibility of those who teach history to contextualize for students their individual and collective identities, which is an important element of civic responsibility. Active citizenship takes bravery, collaboration, and persistence. With that message comes hope: in a better, more equitable future; in more inclusive and stimulating societies; and ultimately, in communities (school, local, national, digital, and international) guided by universal human rights guaranteed by those of us who have studied history. Through the often arduous process of affirming our citizenship rights through our collective civic engagement, we come to find hope. To close, I leave you with Douglass' parting words: "The Celestial Empire, the mystery of ages, is being solved. The fiat of the Almighty, 'Let there be Light,' has not yet spent its force. No abuse, no outrage whether in taste, sport or avarice, can now hide itself from the all-pervading light." (Douglass 1852) History learners (both teachers and students alike) have a lot of work to do but the end-goals are of significant and collective importance. History gives us this hope. Active, critical, and empathetic citizenship gives us the roadmap. Like Douglass, I have nothing but hope for the future, but it's up to our rigorous study of the past combined with our heightened sense of social and civic responsibility to be that "all-pervading light" we so desperately need right now. ●

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Robert Munro is director of Global Studies at Middlesex School and Co-President of Board of Directors at the Robbins House in Concord Massachusetts. He teaches courses in History and seminars in Global Studies, Philosophy, as well as German Language. His research focuses on Empathy in academics and he has created related curricula entitled "Dialogues across Differences" and "Citizenship in Civil Societies" and has given workshops and presentations on these topics. He also coaches and enjoys playing squash and tennis. You can contact him at rmunro@mxschool.edu.