



What Our Students Need, We All Need

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In a time of pervasive cynicism, when many find it unimaginable that American politics as we currently know it will deliver the needed responses to a myriad of problems that threaten to overwhelm our country and world, what our students (what we all) need isn't optimism—a blind faith that everything will right itself—which implies we need not lift a finger or raise a voice to realize the outcome. What is needed is hope. Hope that serves not as a guarantee for a better tomorrow, but rather as a fuse and kindling of energy for action today.

E.B. White, when writing in response to a young man's concerns for the darkness in the world, recognized the power that such hope can offer. White's 1973 letter¹ carried a message that is as relevant today, as much as it was then—a message of hope that only the human spirit can provide:

1. White, E. B. "Wind the Clock." *Letters of Note: Correspondence Deserving of a Wider Circulation*, edited by Shaun Usher, Chronicle Books, 2014.



Dear Mr. Nadeau:

As long as there is one upright man, as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate. Hope is the thing that is left to us, in a bad time. I shall get up Sunday morning and wind the clock, as a contribution to order and steadfastness.

Sailors have an expression about the weather: they say, the weather is a great bluffer. I guess the same is true of our human society—things can look dark, then a break shows in the clouds, and all is changed, sometimes rather suddenly. It is quite obvious that the human race has made a queer mess of life on this planet. But as a people we probably harbor seeds of goodness that have lain for a long time waiting to sprout when the conditions are right. Man's curiosity, his relentlessness, his inventiveness, his ingenuity have led him into deep trouble. We can only hope that these same traits will enable him to claw his way out.

Hang on to your hat. Hang on to your hope. And wind the clock, for tomorrow is another day.

*Sincerely,
E. B. White*

Earlier this summer as I was working with students participating in a Fellows program at the Robin Hood Foundation—an organization committed to eradicating poverty in New York City—one of the young people asked Wes Moore, the newly appointed Chief Executive Officer, what gave him hope in these bleak times. Without hesitation, he echoed White's sentiments by replying, "You do." As a service learning practitioner for over twenty years, I couldn't agree more. It is today's engaged youth that are the "seeds

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of goodness" sprouting across this desolate landscape. In their compassion, empathy, and belief that we *can* and *must* do better, I see what White names as *relentlessness*, *inventiveness*, and *ingenuity*—the traits needed to claw our way out of the world that is, and toward a world that ought to be.

Like Moore, I am encouraged by this generation's activism. At my school, Friends Seminary, I witness every day the actions and voices of empowered youth. Whether it be fourth grade social entrepreneurs who use their Small Mall profits to fund micro-loans for those denied access to traditional banking services, middle schoolers who use pedal-power to redirect the organic waste in their cafeteria from landfills to local community gardens for compost, or upper school students partnering with an interfaith group to end the injustices of solitary confinement, they give me hope.

In the same way that I draw hope from the students I have the honor to work alongside, I am also encouraged by the larger body of youth activists in our country. I recognize the relentless strength behind their words *#neveragain*, the *inventive* means by which they harness social media to carry their message, and the *ingenious* tactics by which they are shining a light on politicians who are perpetuating injustices. Their activism aims to motivate potential voters to join them in changing the existing leadership paradigm. While

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they recognize the tragedies of today, they don't accept that the circumstances must be permanent. These young people are the tide changers and despair's kick in the pants.

And while I draw hope from this younger generation, as an educator, I have been reflecting lately on what wisdom my generation and those before me might offer them. What our youth are feeling today has been felt by visionary spirits of yesterday, as can be seen in French philosopher and Resistance leader, Albert Camus' musings: "We must mend what has been torn apart, make justice imaginable again in a world so obviously unjust, give happiness a meaning once more to peoples poisoned by the misery of the century."² Those spirits, I believe, would want to remind the student activists rising up in response to climate, racial, and economic injustices that social change does not follow a predictable path. Its advancements are not linear in nature. Setbacks and obstacles are certain, but so also is profound transformation. A look back, as they push forward toward a more just world, is a necessary step to fuel their fires.

Author Rebecca Solnit recognizes the importance of exploring this progression of social

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change. She writes in her book, *Hope in the Dark*,³ "Few recognize what a radically transformed world we live in, one that has been transformed not only by such nightmares as global warming and global capital, but by dreams of freedom and of justice. We need to hope for the realization of our own dreams, but also to recognize a world that will remain wilder than our imaginations." Solnit warns that each time we lose sight of progress' incremental changes and the truth that we have made the present state so much better than its past, our hope weakens. This hope that Solnit

speaks of is not hope "like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky," but hope that you don as both a light and a shield as you fight to gain the improvements this world needs.

Equipping our students with the knowledge of the radical peacemakers who preceded them—their struggles for social justice, and the changes they helped bring to fruition—can provide both the succor and the sustenance they will need to go the distance. We must retrace with them the steps of epic struggle for equality in order to understand, as Congressman John Lewis said, "that the struggle for change is not a struggle that

2. Camus, Albert. "The Almond Trees." *Lyrical And Critical Essays*. New York : Knopf, 1969

3. Solnit, Rebecca. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* . Third ed., Haymarket Books, 2016.



lasts for a few days, a few weeks or a few months. It's a struggle of a lifetime." Lewis knows from his lived experience that as young people feel the pull toward activism, let them also be touched by the spirit of history. It is this spirit that will give them hope.

A former chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Civil Rights activist most widely known for organizing and leading protesters in the 1965 march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge from Selma to Montgomery, John Lewis is probably one of the most qualified to speak to young activists about the pace of progress. When Lewis recounts the bloodshed and violence of that day and remembers how he was beaten and left at the foot of the bridge, thinking it the last march of his activist life, he also recognizes that it was that very protest, that moment in the activist struggle for racial equality and all the months that went into its planning, that "gave us the Voting Rights Act making it possible for hundreds and thousands and millions of people to be able to participate in the democratic process." Our students need to understand, as do we, that the struggle for social justice is not an easy or short path. As Lewis says, "Progress can happen. You just have to be faithful to the cause. Just never give up, you never give in and you never give out. Be prepared to run the race."

In my recent reflections, I have also asked myself what educators themselves need in these present days when conditions of life

in America have deteriorated across a broad front, posing a daunting array of challenges to the well-being of our people and planet—from mass incarceration, gun violence, and systemic poverty to environmental degradation and the mismanagement of our planet's natural resources. Broken systems and flawed practices have stoked racial tensions, thwarted educational access and equity, and compromised the rights of citizens to shelter and sustenance. As we adults allow the hope that we see in our students to refuel our own fires of activism, I believe we must intentionally turn our eyes and open our ears to the countless other stories that often fail to make the headlines, stories about what Zoe Weil, co-founder and president of the Institute for Humane Education,

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calls *solutionaries*⁴—people motivated by social good to use their knowledge and skillsets to create a better future. Such stories remind us that positive change is happening NOW; that peace, justice, and equity are growing NOW; that millions are working for a better world NOW. We need these stories to sustain us. Seek out these stories and share them widely in your classrooms and

with your colleagues. Now, more than ever, the spiritual and ethical education of our students calls for humane educators to be storytellers of both the past and the present. These stories help produce the virtues of the mind and the strength of character that our students—that we all—need in order to make Albert Camus' *justice imaginable* a justice realized. ●

4. "What Is a Solutionary?" Institute for Humane Education, humaneeducation.org/who-we-are/.

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See Leitzel Schoen present at our upcoming service event!



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