WE CARRY THE FIRE

Family and Citizenship as Spiritual Calling

RICHARD A. HOEHN

CHURCH PUBLISHING INCORPORATED

An earlier version of "We Worked for Changes" appeared as "Praxis Education for Justice" in *Academy*, XLI: 3/4 (1985). An earlier version of "The More 'Other,' the More We Can Learn" was published as "I'm Here" in *The Lutheran*, March 6, 1985.

Church Publishing
19 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016
www.churchpublishing.org

Cover design by Marc Whitaker, MTWdesign
Typeset by Rose Design

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hoehn, Richard A., 1936- author.
Title: We carry the fire : family and citizenship as spiritual calling / Richard A. Hoehn.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020040677 (print) | LCCN 2020040678 (ebook) | ISBN 9781640653825 (paperback) | ISBN 9781640653832 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Service (Theology) | Vocation--Christianity. | Christian sociology.
Classification: LCC BT738.4 .H64 2021 (print) | LCC BT738.4 (ebook) | DDC 261.8/3--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020040677
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020040678

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CHAPTER 3

We Are the End Game

At whose feet do you lay your freedom?

—Fydor Dostoyevsky

Power Is an Essential Part of Spirituality

Throughout history, people experienced powers that triggered spiritual experiences. Lightning bolts and crashing thunder suggested that the gods were angry. The endless orgasms of ocean waves on the rocks and sand suggested unseen sources. The moon hinted at mysterious rhythms in time and distances in space.

People could not prevent the insects that ravaged their crops or the droughts that led to starvation. They tried to make the rains come, the sun shine, the crops grow, but nature did what it wanted. Humans sensed a vitality and power that mysteriously transcended their ordinary powers. This power became a major source of spiritual experiences and practices—the activity of spirit gods in rain and rainbow, behind rocks, above clouds, and beneath crops.

They believed that something above, below, within, or beyond animated the natural phenomena they experienced. Powerful spirits, both good and evil, lurked in the rhythmic cycles of human and cosmic time, and in places that could be sacred or dangerous. The gods elicited terror, joy, awe, and pain—the fearsome destructiveness of chaos, death, and the unknown—but also, creativity, order, fecundity, beauty.

Since regular people often found themselves on the wrong side of natural and political powers, it was comforting to have a muscular Divine Spirit to counter their relative powerlessness. Gifts and sacrifices were offered to please or appease wrathful and vengeful spirits and rulers. Songs of devotion rose in acknowledgment of mysterious powers of nature, gods, and political rulers.

Religions and ritual practices existed, in part, to tame, mitigate, and routinize unpredictability of power and get it working in our behalf. Even today, people who are thoroughly secular might utter a silent prayer for help from a power greater than themselves in a situation spiraling dangerously out of control.

Sacred stories recounted both magical and mundane powers commanded by gods and political rulers, sometimes rolled into one bundle—holy wars, the divine right of kings, monuments, and temples. It is not surprising that scriptures include creation stories not only to answer where-did-it-all-come-from, but as an acknowledgment of the mysterious powers that apparently could create this complex something out of nothing.

When Obi-Wan Kenobi grasped Luke Skywalker's hand and solemnly intoned, "the Force be with you," people muttered to themselves, "Yeah. It's something like that, a force, a power for good that can help." The dark side in *Star Wars* is fear, anger, hatred; aggression that is passionate, seductive, and leads to evil acts. George Lucas intended "the Force be with you" as the positive blessing of a non-sectarian god.

Twelve-step groups call it a higher power. The AA *Big Book* says, "Lack of power (to quit drinking), that was our dilemma. We had to find a power by which we could live, and it had to be a *Power greater than* [more-than] *ourselves.*" Power (muscularity) is an intrinsic element in a fully realized spirituality. Power to overcome the demons of our inner drives. Power to survive and make living together habitable. Whether and how God exercises power in our daily life is an important question for another time. *We Carry the Fire* focuses on how we use our powers to carry the fire.

The Beatles sang, "All we need is love." Interpersonal love. But politics, the use of influence and power, is also a way of showing love to people both within and beyond arm's reach. When you engage politically, you can experience the satisfaction of using your personal power, your abilities, your moral values to see the gift of life rising out of the ashes where death would otherwise prevail.

We Advocated Changes

The stories that follow describe a seminary course where students used their collective power to bring about constructive social change. They read assigned books and pamphlets—ranging from the American Friends Service Committee to the National Rifle Association—about how to make change happen, and then they chose a project where they could learn how to bring about change by attempting to change something in the local community.

The stories illustrate how a small (typically a dozen), but energized group can use whatever power they have at hand to make change happen. Some of the projects succeeded. Some went sideways, but that too was a learning experience that helped the next time around. But none of these projects would have had a chance if just a dozen ordinary people with no extraordinary power, no budget, a short timeframe, and a lot of passion, thought, and energy had not bothered.

What makes these stories social and political spirituality is that they rise out of spiritual values and vision, inculcated by families, congregations, and other people. Values that said, "People should not have to endure unnecessary suffering." Values that said, "My life is intrinsically connected with other peoples' lives." Spiritual because of the sense of solidarity in working for justice together. Spiritual because we all want to feel that our lives connect with something larger (more-than) ourselves—"My piss-ant little life can make a difference in the real world," our calling, why we are here. Spiritual because we got results that added to the wellbeing of the human spirit.

Better Jail Conditions

One class decided to tackle conditions in the city jail. The Junior Bar was just completing a study of jail conditions, ready to make a report to city council. But their effort might die for lack of community interest. Our timing was just exactly right. *Lesson: timing is everything.* Timing is partly chosen and partly accidental, but it can make all the difference in small actions, elections, and social movements. Period.

The group chose a conflict strategy to dramatize conditions in the jail. We would picket city hall and press the case for change at the Monday morning city council meeting.[1] We were helped by Steve Larson, the urban minister, and Cliff Kirkpatrick, then executive director of the Community of Churches.[2] *Lesson: find the right people to help with your task.* Without them, we could not have done it.

As an independent citizens' group, not a seminary group, we could picket, make demands, and appear on the evening television news without being linked, we hoped, to the seminary or university and protect the school, not to mention our own sweet asses.

With much brainstorming and laughter, the group chose the name PORE—People Opposed to Repressive Enforcement. We were "for the PORE!" We had fun. Texas author and activist Jim Hightower (as I recall) described something as "more fun than eating ice cream in a bathtub naked." *Lesson: politics is sometimes an eating-ice-cream-while naked-in-a-bathtub experience.*

Steve, the urban minister, visited people in jail to document their complaints. We contacted an ACLU attorney to learn about our rights because we did not want accidentally to commit an infraction leading to arrest. We phoned local television and radio news departments to alert them to a Monday morning demonstration. We also got on the list of those who would make a presentation. *Lesson: get the facts; be disciplined.* Do not just act impulsively. Think through very carefully what you want to do. Prepare. Your parents were right. Do your homework.

Using city-generated statistics, we prepared a brochure that detailed problems in the jail—no toilet paper, a cold greasy egg sandwich for breakfast that had been cooked the night before and left

1. I say "we" because though I was the professor, I did not tell them what to do and always considered students my peers with different kinds of knowledge; for example, those who had just returned from service in Vietnam had experienced things I could barely imagine. The class made decisions by voting. It was important that they learned how to discover a relevant project, get to group consensus, plan, and take responsibility for implementation.

2. Cliff later became the stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A).

unrefrigerated till served early morning, cells designed for eighty sometimes holding 300, no blankets or mattresses, felons mixed in with misdemeanors. If arrested on the weekend for a minor infraction, you could be stuck in jail in rough company until a Monday morning hearing to determine whether they had enough evidence to hold you.

On Sunday evening we gathered at a Presbyterian Church office and fried ten dozen eggs in heavy grease, slapped them between slices of white bread, and let them set until morning. A reporter jammed a microphone into our faces so we could practice for Monday morning's hoped-for media. We made picket signs, including an "Eat at Joes" sandwich board, sandwiches in plastic baggies stapled onto a display board. *Lesson: be creative.*

Monday morning, leagues outside our comfort zone, we anxiously picketed city hall and handed cold egg sandwiches to city council members as they walked toward the building. Local media showed up in full force. *Lesson: be brave; stretch your personal boundaries.* Have the courage of your convictions.

Later that day we heard ourselves interviewed on radio and saw our demonstration on television. It was news because this medium-sized conservative city was unaccustomed to public demonstrations. What works in a town may not work in a big city or a different era.

The students made a presentation to the city council. One class member, who was also a therapist, used his skills to goad an opposing city council member into a foolish outburst, which only made the council member look silly and our case stronger, though it probably cost the therapist a city contract. The council referred the matter to committee.

The local newspapers carried a picture of our protest. Headlines shouted, "City Jail Conditions Protested" and "Jail Termed 'Inhumane.'" The next day: "City Jail Chief Blames Sorry 1938 Facilities" and listed PORE's charges. Much to our surprise, the chief jailer and the police were mostly on our side because they worked there and wanted better jail conditions too. But better conditions depended on more money, and the city and county governments held the purse strings.

So, we wrote letters to the editor and continued lobbying behind the scenes. *Lessons: media coverage can make a difference, and you never know with certainty who your allies or opponents are until they show up.*

During our demonstration we had handed out pamphlets inviting people to call our number and join. A stranger showed up at a classroom meeting. When Steve arrived, he recognized the newcomer as a city undercover policeman and greeted the officer by name. The officer hastily headed out the door. The city now knew who we were.

We were anxious to get on with it, lest it drag out past the end of the semester and our group disperse. By the early 1970s, college presidents had figured out that the best strategy to disperse a protest was to "delay until summer vacation." So, Cliff from the Community of Churches mounted a behind-the-scenes effort to lobby individual members of the council.

More newspaper headlines: "Jail Study Panel to Seek Changes." Then, "City Council Adopts Jail Improvements." When the subcommittee report was released, the council agreed to hot meals, mattresses, and blankets for the steel slab bunks, to bring in a judge Sunday morning to clear out Saturday night drunks, and to post the jail rules bilingually.

More headlines: "Jail Reform Actions Leave Much Undone." But: "These moves take care of some of the more deplorable conditions that have existed at the jail. . . . Members of PORE (People Opposed to Repressive Enforcement) and other concerned citizens are to be congratulated for their compassion and tenacity in pressing for needed reforms."

There were delays. "Council Puts Off Action on Drunks: Cost Questioned." But four years later, I went to that jail to get someone released. The blankets, mattresses, and bilingual rules for visiting hours were still there. Change happened and continued to benefit those who passed through that system. It was not a giant leap for humankind, but then the whole effort was only that of a dozen seminarians, allied with Urban Ministry and the Community of Churches, in a single three-credit course during a single semester.

We had great fun as well as the satisfaction of helping make changes happen. More than thirty years later, when I bumped into Cliff at a meeting, his first gleeful words were, "Do you remember that time we changed conditions in the city jail?"

Experiences like this are deeply meaningful because they connect us with other people, help people who are suffering a terrible time in their lives. We also helped the jailers, brought a little justice to the system, and added to the sum of human goodness. The people who rotate through that jail do not even know that we exist. Our satisfaction comes not from anyone saying thanks, but from knowing that we made a difference, however small, through political engagement.

A lot of factors must work together for an effort like this to be successful. But that time it worked, in large part because of the creativity and bravery of the students. It was a spiritual work, a spiritual experience, and the results enlarged the human spirit.

Handicap Access

The following year's students decided, despite my expressed doubts, to address handicap access at the seminary, a local congregation, and the university. At that time, the notion of special handicap access was just gaining traction, especially in conservative parts of the country.

We gathered articles and an accessibility checklist from the National Paraplegia Foundation. As a youth, I had delivered the *Butler Eagle* to the parsonage where Jim Grey, the executive director of the local branch of the Paraplegia Foundation, had grown up. Sometime after moving to Texas, Jim was in a club where someone started shooting. He was not the target, but he was injured and lived out his life in his wheelchair, serving other persons with disabilities (social spirituality).

The students who chose to work with a congregation met with the property committee. Through a series of meetings and discussions, the church committee gradually decided to follow guidelines for people with handicaps and improve ramps, bathrooms, door widening, and a designated parking area.

The group focused on the seminary crafted a list of desired changes, sent them to the student government, and lobbied the dean and faculty. The students also used a wheelchair and crutches to get a personal feeling for the experience and demonstrate to others the difficulties of negotiating the seminary building where most classrooms were on the second floor, but there were no ramps or elevators.

A faculty member filed a complaint against me after noticing students' giggling at the awkwardness of carrying someone down two sets of steps in a wheelchair. She said, rightly, that real people in wheelchairs do not find steps funny. At some point the dean apparently made the complaint disappear.

On the university side, students drafted a bill and presented it to the Student House of Representatives, and it was duly reported in the student newspaper. They also took their complaints and proposed changes to the vice chancellor. The Student House approved the bill, but the vice chancellor was unhappy. Some of the information the students presented was outdated. And since we had not asked, we were unaware of changes that the university was already planning to make, or so they said. *Lesson: if you are going to lobby, be careful to get your facts straight or you will look unprepared, foolish, and you may delay rather than accelerate progress toward your goals.*

The vice chancellor wrote a long letter to the Student House of the university listing things the university had already done, planned to do, and expressing frustration at our effort. We responded with an equally long letter apologizing for our mistakes and suggesting that, measured by the Aristotelian criterion of "best under the circumstances," the university was apparently trying, but that by Aristotle's more stringent criterion, "the best absolutely," they weren't doing very well, and cited evidence to support that claim.

A few weeks later, I noticed that curb corners on the streets in the immediate vicinity of the seminary had suddenly been smashed into rubble. Just the corners. Just around the seminary. I imagined students swinging sledgehammers in the middle of the night to break down the corners so that the new corners would be ramped for

wheelchairs. I figured "Don't ask, don't tell" and to this day do not know what happened.

What I do know is that by the end of the semester, the church had begun the changes required for handicap access, and the seminary had ramped curbs and added a new handicap-accessible seminary apartment as well as an accessible bathroom. The administration, of course, contended that our activities had nothing to do with the changes. The students did not care what the administration said. They wanted results, not medals.

A student summarized what she had learned:

1. Increased our awareness of handicap concerns. (I almost let the air out of the tires of a truck parked in a handicap slot at a restaurant.)
2. Change is never easy. It often results in pain.
3. Even safe issues have a "bear in the woods." People are easily threatened.
4. Information has power, but quantitative information has a premium value.
5. Bottom line is dollars.
6. You have more power in presence than on paper or by telephone.
7. It takes time to go to meetings. It takes tenacity.
8. Do good research on the issue. Identify the political structure. Identify allies.
9. Know the political realities of the institutional structure you are dealing with.

School for Undocumented Children

Another class decided to work alongside in solidarity with people who were trying to make it possible for undocumented workers' children to attend public schools without having to pay tuition. Undocumented children, mostly Mexican and Central American, had long attended schools alongside Texas-born children, but the legislature had passed a

bill that terminated state funds for the education of children of undocumented workers.

Our first strategy was to try to convince members of the school board to make an exception and carry the children without state reimbursement. We familiarized ourselves with their backgrounds and status, general leanings, and who they listened to. It quickly became clear that little could be expected from that quarter. *Lesson: stasis, status, and money prevail*. We had no standing in the community and certainly no money.

The class discovered that a small band of local people was running a free school for undocumented workers' children in a church. Students met with a reporter from a newspaper and leaked information about the school. A few days later a Dallas newspaper front-page headline proclaimed, "'Night Schools' Sidestep Law to Help."

The article described a small group of people gathered in a "clandestine night meeting . . . hidden from public view," anonymous, but not to talk about drugs or pornography, but the "education of the estimated 500 children of undocumented workers in Fort Worth who are not permitted in public schools." Within a day, television news programs showed Hispanic children trying to study in makeshift classrooms. Again, media strategies were crucial.

The class, discouraged by the school board's continuing lack of response, decided to explore a legal challenge. A local attorney agreed to pursue the case *pro bono*. The class developed go-to-court fever. We boned up on INS citizenship requirements and policies.

We first had to find an undocumented parent willing to complain that her child was being denied fair treatment—not easy because an undocumented parent who goes public might be deported. A student told a local journalist about a woman who had been deported, leaving her children, ages six to fourteen behind. "The family lives in a dark, musty house on the North Side," began the article by Robert Seltzer.

I told the seminary dean that a class was about to sue the school board on behalf of undocumented children. He later referred to it as the day he was glad he was wearing brown pants. Yet, he was so strongly

committed to academic freedom that he did not try to stop us. In enlisting an attorney, we had gained a sense of power and reality, but we lost control of the process. We learned that the issue was already before the Fifth Circuit Court in New Orleans and decided to wait until the court issued its judgment. Long after the semester ended, schools nationwide were required to admit undocumented children.

An endemic problem with the course was that when the semester ended, the project had to end. So, there were always questions about how ethically to drop a project that was unfinished. Several class members decided to build a coalition to carry on part of the work at the local level. With clergy support, they called a breakfast meeting that led to the Coalition of Good Neighbors. A student became a member of the steering committee; another took a position as a local urban minister and continued to work with the coalition on tutoring programs for newly arriving families. Still other students published their opinions in the "Voices of the People" column in the local newspaper.

We learned about current conditions, policies, and legal options, but did not change any laws or policies. *Lessons: When you participate, you may not win but you will learn more each time; you may influence if not change structures; and ethical endings count.*

Were these social justice projects just student pranks? They certainly were fun, and it felt good to be part of a wider group of students nation- and worldwide who were expressing their values through political activism. Some who took the course have gone on to decades of full- or part-time vocations in *conscientization*, social service, ministry, and advocacy. A former student recently wrote, "I want you to know the incredible amount of impact you had and have had on my life and ministry, which includes being a parish pastor, denominational leader, community organizer, and initiator of a service non-profit."

One student went on to work with women in the developing world, another to start a housing nonprofit in the United States, another to train to become a community organizer, still another to work as a substance abuse counselor in a Roman Catholic–sponsored

halfway house, and many have made social service and social justice a central element in their ministry as laity or pastors in congregations.

It is not always easy to measure the amount of change that happens in society, but participation in political justice can build spiritual identity, which plays out over time, even generations when shared through families and other social relationships. The number of people who were helped and inspired remains unknown and uncountable.

Power as the Ability to Act

The first definition of power is "the ability to act." You have the power, the ability, to get up in the morning, to put jelly on your toast, make coffee, hug your loved ones.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum describe our ability to act as "capabilities." They say that in our lives we have "alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be—the various 'functionings' he or she can achieve," capabilities that "vary from such elementary matters as being well nourished and disease-free to more complex doings or beings, such as having self-respect, preserving human dignity, taking part in the life of the community."[3]

For a person to be free, they must be able to actualize these capabilities. You are not fully free if you are disease-ridden, malnourished, beset by thieves, being sold for a price, or unable to get an education, health care, and means of survival. You cannot achieve your maximum human potential unless certain basic human requirements are met, first among them the basic ability to live and to express yourself purposively. You cannot be fully empowered if you do not have enough to eat and the ability to participate meaningfully in the community.

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3. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3, 30. See also Amartya Sen's *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2009). Nussbaum proposes a summary of her "thick vague theory of the good" as she lists the essential functions required to constitute a human life, and therefore the things that we aim to achieve, in "Human Functioning and Social Justice," *Political Theory*, May 1992, 202–46.

Richard Rorty writes, "My candidate for the most distinctive and praiseworthy human capacity is our ability to trust and to cooperate with other people, and in particular to work together so as to improve the future."[4] The force is our ability to act, our creativity in the face of fixed ideas and structures, our ability to affect changes in our lives and the wider world when we work with others. Apathy and death are the thieves that, in mid-morning, steal our power, our ability to think, feel, and act.

Just as it matters which more-than you seek, it matters how you use your powers—whether you act for goodness or evil for yourself and others. And the power that is generally available to people in democratic societies happens most dramatically through politics. Politics amplifies the power of the individual to become "we the people." But it takes a lot of us working together to bring change. We are kayaks in relation to large corporations and governments that are like ocean liners and aircraft carriers—big, slow, and hard to divert. It takes 40,000 regular people contributing $25 each to offset the $1 million contribution of a single billionaire.

For the first time in human history, we the people also have the social and political power that previous societies attributed to a god or gods—to be the destroyer of worlds. The choice is ours, well, and nature's (climate change, asteroids). Ours is the spiritual task of using power for good. We are the force, but we do not force. Our work is to discern and work for moral results within democratic norms and the rule of law. Democracy is fragile and continuously needs renewal.

Power in its largest social setting is the venue of politics, the ability to influence more than each of us can do individually. We join with others to have enough muscle to make large-scale changes. Politics is an essential vehicle through which we can help create the common good by working in solidarity with people who are often of other faiths, races, and cultures. The moral exercise of power is a spiritual process that can provide spiritual experiences.

4. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), xiii.

A Mayor's Thoughts on Power, by Jim Rurak

I wrote my friend, theologian and politician Jim Rurak,

> When I talk about spirituality, it has difficult challenges that includes your time campaigning and in office. I believe that you, Kathy [his wife], along with others, worked your tail off to become elected, and then did as much good as you could while in office.
>
> That work was a spiritual work in that it was a striving to improve the human condition, the human spirit, to move the chunk of humanity that you had access to, forward. It did not feel 'spiritual' most of the time, but it was a spiritual work that delivered spiritual results, no matter how compromised they were by the political/bureaucratic process.
>
> And, if you, further, imagine that your striving is part of that great body of human witnesses, in every country, over all time, of every religion and race who sacrifices for the good of humanity and the planet, then perhaps that can bring spiritual feelings as well as spiritual results.

Jim wrote back,

> I do see the work you did and do, the work we do and did, as spiritual in that it serves the greater human good. But I do acknowledge sin. A lot of what we did and do serves ourselves. I do believe that in our ambiguous efforts there are many moments when our limited and even selfish motives are transformed by our sense of serving something greater, when we act then for that greater purpose, in short when we are converted.
>
> Conversion isn't just a come-to-Jesus moment confined to a religious setting. It happens all the time, and these actions, personal and social, are spiritual and the experience of them is of something greater than us working in and through us. Call this what you will, but acknowledge its power to change us from those who think they know best to those who are bettered by it when they serve it. And these experiences and actions do both give us and define that

direction which collectively serves that "higher power." But having actual, political power is not antithetical to serving a higher power.

At many times and in many places through history, monarchs ruled by God's authority and were subject to no earthly authority. There was an aura around the monarch that no mere human force should penetrate. Supposedly, democratic revolutions changed all this. Power and authority come from the consent of the governed. No magic surrounds elected officials. In fact, if today there is anything special surrounding them, it is the smell of snake oil.

True as this may be as seen from the outside, the experience from the inside, from being elected to wield power, is a different story.

I was elected Mayor of Haverhill, Massachusetts in 1993. The office is that of a "real mayor," in that there is no city manager and the mayor is the sole authority to hire and fire city employees. The mayor is the chief financial officer and, in our special case, the "owner" of a hospital and a nursing home, and the mayor is elected directly by the people for a set term; there is no recall provision.

Once elected, then, the mayor of a mid-sized city has a lock on real power. It is not the power over millions, like that of a president, governor, or large city "mayor." But it is direct power over policies and people that has both immediate and long-term impacts.

Once elected, my life changed. People I once may have looked up to now called me 'mayor.' They deferred to me in public and rarely challenged me in private. City department heads who knew their jobs asked for my consent and vied for my approval.

It wasn't just an ego boost; it was a real shocker, one that I felt I had to match with all my personal, intellectual, and political abilities.

If I messed up (it was only my first of four two-year terms), I'd be on a downward spiral. That is where the consent of the governed comes in. But one thing made it work, even produced something of the feeling of invincibility: wielding power. Yes, try to be fair, moral, and reasonable, but, above all, wield power. Power, wielded effectively, breeds more power and more respect. And, when you mess up, you gain power by admitting it and facing the music—just as a king might seek penance from a bishop.

So, my simple conclusion from having had such power is that while it now might be derived from a democratic process, the experience and effect of wielding it differs little from when it was thought to have been derived from God. A president, senator, governor, mayor may fall from grace more quickly than a king, by the verdict of the electorate, but when in power, power is power. The more you use it, the more you accomplish, the better it feels.

Let me be clear. I am not talking about how you acquire power, nor about how you maintain it, nor about whether you wield it morally or not. I am talking about how it feels when you have it and use it. It feels magical. You say, "Do this," and roads get built, schools too, laws get enforced, things get bought and sold. No matter how hard you had to work to get it and maintain it, when you use it, you feel the "wand" in your hand turn dreams into facts.

That is why few people willingly give up power. Usually, you lose it because the "wand" turned you into a sorcerer's apprentice. You unleashed forces beyond your control, and they came back to overwhelm you. Or, more prosaically, people want more or less than you give them. Or you get into trouble. All of that is a topic for a much larger analysis.

The experience of power that I've described raises only one question. Is it good? My answer is an unequivocal, "Yes." You need not be a mayor or a king to experience power. But you must be something, somebody. One of the most powerful people I've known was also one of the most humble.

He was a carpenter who knew what he was doing and knew what he didn't know. He would never tell an electrician what to do, but if an electrician tried to tell him how to do his job, a wall as strong as that in China went up. And he kept going at his own pace. The building went up, straight, true, and square. He loved every minute of it. Another is a poet. She loves every minute of trying to make a poem work. She is delighted when it finally does. Because of this, she not only creates great poems, she appreciates great poems greatly.

You can describe power as "the ability to act," but the experience of power is in the acting and feeling yourself as the agency of

accomplishment. From Karl Marx to Adam Smith, the root experience is the same. It is to feel human, to make a mark that befits your abilities. For that simple reason, power produces both good and evil. But the experience of power in itself is a great part of what it means to be alive.

Power in itself is good. It is spiritual and serves a higher power when it is held accountable to the purposes and people from which it is derived. When those purposes and people are accountable to the higher power that frees them from their selfish ambitions, then the life for which we're meant to live is lived.

Politics Is the Oxygen of Community Life

When people say, "I don't get involved in politics," that's like saying, "I don't get involved in breathing air." Politics is part of the social oxygen that gives us life. We are actively or passively, by commission or omission, involved in politics. There are politics in family relationships, in social groups, at work, in all parts of our social life, though the focus here is on politics in public life.

When people say, "I don't do politics," consider responding, "But, politics does you." Politics in public life affects us whether we choose to participate or not. The choice not to take an active role leaves the decisions up to other people who may not have your, your family, or your community's best interests in mind. In fact, many who have enormous power care mainly about themselves.

Author James Patterson wrote, "These days people all around the world are angry about and suspicious of the super-rich and powerful. . . . we ought to be. To put it simply some people think they can operate outside the law. And that's what they do."[5] Or at least many who have huge amounts of wealth and power do.

The workings of politics are as *mysterious* as those of social interactions—difficult to understand and hidden behind appearances.

5. James Patterson, "Author's Note," in James Patterson and John Connolly with Tim Malloy, *Filthy Rich* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2016), x.

How can my tiny effort make any difference? Politics is certainly *meaningful* for citizen participants, whether lobbying, running for, or holding office.

Politics is the way we achieve results that are *more-than* any one individual can achieve; results that affect whole communities and the world. Public politics is, by definition, *mighty/muscular*, and at its best *moral*, with distinctive political *methods* and *memories* of historical events crystalized in laws and statues, procedures, heroines, monuments, and traditions that influence decision making.

Participation in public life is a spiritual calling, sometimes destroying individuals and degrading society, sometimes saving lives and bringing greater wholeness to our collective life. In a democracy, political action by individuals is the way to counterbalance abusive power, especially with and on behalf of those who are most victimized. We are dependent on the participation of one another.

The Declaration of Independence Was Also a Declaration of Dependence

"Americans" are justly proud of our independence. When public policy tradeoffs are made in the United States, freedom often prevails over equality, and freedom is a wonderful gift from the many who have sacrificed to establish and maintain it. However, the Declaration of Independence was also a Declaration of Dependence: mutual dependence among widely separated colonies to fight and die for something they believed in but which lacked a clear future. In Benjamin Franklin's well-known words: "We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."

The former colonies were not cohesive after the Revolutionary War. Some thought that Royalists, loyal to the crown, would still seek ways to secede and reconnect with England. And the Southern states did secede less than a hundred years later, or as I call it, "one Mary Catherine" later, since that's what I decided to denote one-hundred-year units after my mother became a centenarian.

Great Britain had the largest army and navy in the world, capable of invading and blockading the colonies. We received assistance from the French, and one of the big concerns was whether the colonies would simply be trading Britain for France as colonial masters. Without the French navy, supplies, and financial assistance, we might not have achieved independence, so the colonists were dependent on France as well as one another. In today's interlocked trade, travel, and tech world, there is even less individual or national self-sufficiency. The struggle to manage our long-declared independence, dependence, and interdependence continues.

The Beginning:

> That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men (sic), deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, . . . with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.
>
> —Declaration of Independence. July 4, 1776

The Middle:

> We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence (sic), promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.
>
> —Preamble to the Constitution
> of the United States of America, 1787

The End Game:

> It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before Us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion . . . and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.
>
> —Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg, November 19, 1863

An inscription on the wall behind the nineteen-foot sculpture of Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, says Lincoln saved the union. But he knew that no one person could or did. He was dependent on others, as he said, "From these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion."

Yes, *they* died. They died at Gettysburg, at Lexington and Concord, on the beaches of Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, Iwo Jima, the Chosin Reservoir, Khe Sanh, Kamdesh. They also were killed on a balcony in Memphis, in a motorcade in Dallas, in protests, in barrios, in the 'hood. Others lived, worked, and sacrificed for a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." "*By* the people"—not, as it too often seems, "buy the people." We are the end game. And yet . . .

People Avoid Politics

Many people dislike and disparage politics because they see self-aggrandizement, partisan posturing, public bickering, treachery, bureaucracy, and corruption. When Glenda Jackson, who won two Oscars and also served in the British parliament, was asked who had the biggest egos, politicians or actors, she said, "The egos that I saw in Parliament wouldn't have been tolerated for thirty seconds in the theater."[6]

Some people ignore politics because it is all they can do to earn a living and take care of their family. Others are distracted from active citizenship by the toys, trinkets, and perks of contemporary life that they think they need. Some are distracted by popular spiritualities that reduce spirituality to individual bliss, escape, inner peace.

People say that voting and politics do not make a difference. The issues seem too complex and intractable. The forces arrayed seem too large, the processes obscure and messy. Politics sometimes seems like a set of games other people play somewhere else that have little effect on our lives, and only get our attention when we feel harmed.

6. Belinda Luscombe, "11 Questions," *Time*, April 16, 2018, 56.

Every human activity is subject to chaos and corruption. "In every man, of course a demon lies hidden—the demon of rage, the demon of lustful heat at the screams of the tortured victim, the demon of lawlessness let off the chain" (Ivan Karamazov to his brother Alyosha).[7] But when it comes to public sector politics, bad decisions are multiplied because the decisions made by governments have an enormous influence on people and events—Mao's "Politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed."

Absolute power does tend to corrupt absolutely, but as community organizers point out, powerlessness also corrupts absolutely. People lose a sense of shared citizenship when their voices are not heard, and rulers make policies that are not in the public interest, especially when they impact "The Last, The Lost, The Least" (song by Relient K).

For all the problems, we do expect decisions to get made, fire trucks, snowplows and school buses to arrive, pot holes to be filled, rules of the road, dependability of contracts, vulnerable people cared for, schools that teach, hospitals that heal, courts that protect, war prevented. We expect to be shielded from some large forces of evil, and good promoted for individuals, communities, and the natural world. In an uncertain world, it is our role to tip the balance toward that good.

Ed Chambers quotes Sheldon Wolin: "By politicalness I mean our capacity for developing into beings who know and value what it means to participate in and be responsible for the care and improvement of our common and collective life." Chambers adds, "Developing our politicalness means that we know and value what it means to have power. . . . Exercising politicalness means that we participate in something larger than our individual projects. . . . The problem is that average Americans don't see politicalness as a vocation. . . . Living out our religious and democratic values requires that public life be part of our citizenship and mission."[8]

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7. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Constance Garnett (New York: The Lowell Press, 2009), 265. Retrieved from *https://www.gutenberg.org/files/28054/28054-pdf.pdf.*

8. Edward T. Chambers, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 70–71.

People also complain that government takes too much of their money, though they are happy to cash any government check with their name on it. We do have to be cautious, vigilant, about governmental intrusion in our private lives—our civil liberties, our individual understandings of morality, our religious freedom, as well as our so-called private wealth.

Governments, like corporations or any large institution, waste money as well as spend it well. The largest item in the federal budget is for defense, and that is probably where the greatest waste occurs. But face it, you and I probably waste a high percentage of our income too. Do I really need whatever it is that I desire, or just want? And, when policy makers say we cannot afford this or that social program, do they ever look at the full picture of American spending?

- In 2017, consumers spent much more on jewelry and watches ($82.5 billion) than the federal government spent on the Food Stamp Program ($68 billion).[9] The program gave benefits to an average forty-six million Americans. I hear complaints about the cost of food stamps but not about jewelry and watches.
- In the United States, bars and nightclubs generate about $24 billion in revenues each year," and that doesn't include the alcohol we buy from liquor stores, whereas the federal government spent $5.4 billion on the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) which served nearly seven million people in 2018.[10]
- The Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which serves nearly two million children, cost the federal government about $12 billion in fiscal year 2018. CHIP provides routine check-ups,

9. "This How Much Americans Spend on Jewelry and Watches," Edhan Golan, May 13, 2019; "The US Jewelry State of the Market Report," *https://www.edahngolan.com/so-how-much-do-we-spend-on-jewelry-and-watches/*; "Food Stamp Costs Hit Seven-Year Low," Breitbart, *https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2017/12/12/food-stamp-hit-seven-year-low/*.

10. Brandongaille, 22 Bar and Nightclub Industry Statistics and Trends, *https://brandongaille.com/22-bar-and-nightclub-industry-statistics-and-trends/*. *https://www.hhs.gov/about/budget/fy2018/budget-in-brief/cms/chip/index.html*.

immunizations, prescriptions, dental and vision care, inpatient and outpatient hospital care, laboratory, X-ray and emergency services for children. By comparison, "Americans spent about $15 billion for carbonated soft drinks, many of which contribute to obesity."[11] In 2017, there was a big fight in Congress as to whether to boost funding for CHIP, but little, if any, mention of limiting soft drinks.

- We spend ten times as much on shoes as on official foreign assistance. By one estimate, tobacco users "spend more than $320 billion a year on cigarettes and health care for smoking-related illnesses."[12] Yet, nearly 700 million people in developing countries live in extreme poverty, living on less than the U.S. equivalent of $1.90 a day.

We vote with our dollars as well as with our ballots. Watches are a good thing, and the tradeoffs are more complex than these comparisons suggest. I enjoy a martini as much as the next person, but if pressed, I would admit that the school lunch and WIC programs are more important than an evening at a restaurant. It is just that we do not think about it. Governments are convenient targets while our individual actions are "just normal consumer behavior." Perhaps we should stop to examine "normal consumer behavior."

Decisions about the public good are decisions made by the body politic, whether consciously or unconsciously, by action or inaction, passion or apathy. The Good Samaritan story, so often cited in religious circles, is both helpful and unhelpful. We do want to help the person whom we see "by the side of the road," but we also need to influence the policies of governments so that we help the millions who live by roads that we will never see.

Today's Good Samaritan does acts of justice through political action as well as acts of charity. It is not about guilt, but about

11. Sheila Marikar, "Fizz Is Now Big Biz," *New York Times Sunday Styles*, July 14, 2019, 1.

12. Adam McCann, "The Real Cost of Smoking," WalletHub, January 15, 2020, *https://wallethub.com/edu/the-financial-cost-of-smoking-by-state/9520/*.

responsibility. Or maybe productive guilt. Or maybe repentance and making amends. Or maybe just being realistic about our own good fortune and the relatively poor luck of the "other." Theologize however you wish, just do it.

Our Soul Brought Us Here

Senate Leader Charles Schumer was a Harvard student who had never heard of 1967's presidential contender Eugene McCarthy when a fellow student invited him to a political rally in New Hampshire where Schumer "caught the bug." "He loved the excitement of politics, along with the camaraderie and the sense of being involved in great events."[13]

Participation in the larger civic and political structures of our lives is, in one sense, the highest form of human activity, because this participation enables us to express our knowledge and interests to help the body politic. Millions live or die, thrive or fail to survive, depending on large-scale political decisions in which we can play an important role.

Politics is supremely important for the life and death struggle of individuals, peoples, and nations. We cannot have good communities unless they are composed of good people, but we cannot have good people unless we have good communities. Each supports and is dependent on the other. Enlarging the realm of family and civic goodness is a spiritual calling.

On May 17, 1968, in Catonsville, Maryland, nine war resisters removed files from the Selective Service Office which identified 378 young men to be conscripted to fight in the Vietnam War. They dumped them in the street below, poured homemade napalm over them, and set them on fire. They submitted to arrest, trial, and prison sentences, though some went underground to encourage further resistance before they reported to prison.

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13. Elizabeth Kolbert, "Can Chuck Schumer Check Donald Trump?" *New Yorker*, March 27, 2017, *https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/27/can-chuck-schumer-check-donald-trump*.

At the trial of the Catonsville Nine, Daniel Berrigan testified in response to the court's unwillingness to judge the morality of the war:

> Your honor, we are having great difficulty in trying to adjust to the atmosphere of a court from which the world is excluded, and the events that brought us here are excluded. . . . Our moral passion was excluded. It is as though we were subjects of an autopsy, were being dismembered by people who wondered whether or not we had a soul. We are sure that we have a soul. It is our soul that brought us here. It is our soul that got us into trouble.[14]

"Nine Kitchen Matches"

The wind, like history, blows as it will,
carries the ashes from the dusty street.
Nine kitchen matches, nine lovers
of *Peace and Decency and Unity and Love*
kindled the fire that was kindled in them,
mysterious as lightning, enchanting as moonlight,
animating them with the power to act
for those whose deaths were demanded
by faceless, cold-hearted, patrons of power.

Crumpled and black, thin as butterfly wings,
papers of war drift away into the past
as if the fire were snuffed out,
its light extinguished, doused
by the cold futility of souls burning within,
of hearts aflame with life,
in a worldwide Ice Age of death.
Even the cruel staying power

14. Daniel Berrigan, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (Boston: Beacon, 1970), 113–14.

of homemade napalm cannot preserve
the light and heat of their fiery witness.

Powerless criminals ignite resistance
to criminal powers, voice moral passion
to cold steel exclusion of passion from policy,
life from law. In time their voices
and the ashes of their signal fire
move underground. Entombed, perhaps,
but not. They arise from below
kindle new flames among the people,
anoint them with the fire of resistance,
the power of love.

Even cruel napalm, flowing slowly, sticking
tenaciously, extruding its flaying terror
indiscriminate over all, cannot outlive the light
that is not the sun, incendiary giver and taker of life.
Like the naked napalmed girl we know,
arms extended in terror, fleeing down a road of war,
carving a path in our memory, images endure.
Photographs and films, stories and tombstones. Names
etched on the dark granite wound at the center of power,
reflecting the power of each, the remains of death,
the flames of life.

At Catonsville, a single fire was lit
by nine kitchen matches and one small batch
of homemade napalm. It burned three hundred papers
ordering young men to death. And soon
it was dust swept away by history's wind
and orderly brooms that burned children

as casually as paper. From prison cells
and catacombs, in pulpits and protests,
the ashes of nine arose, striking new sparks,
burning new images, kindling new power
to resist the old. Nine matches, ninety marches,
nine hundred candles, nine thousand fires.

—Jim Benton