

# ***AN OPEN LETTER TO YOUNG AMERICANS***

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Several weeks ago, I happened to be listening to National Public Radio's daily news program when they carried an extended report on the attitudes of young Americans who are registered voters, but who seem not much inclined to cast a ballot in the upcoming election. As I listened to the reporter's probing questions and the responses of people who were obviously young, intense and concerned, I found myself wishing I could engage them in a dialogue about the nature of the democratic process, the role government plays in our lives, and the meaning of the political process as it has developed in this country. Since my only real forum is this pulpit, I have decided to spend this morning sharing with you my response in the form of an open letter to young Americans.

My dear fellow Citizens,

I have learned from a recent radio report how deeply disaffected you feel about the political process, and how despairing you are of the ability of government to respond in a positive manner to the many problems and challenges which face us as a people. In interviews with reporters from National Public Radio, you expressed anger at the choices which the political process presents you, feeling that you are confronting unpalatable choices and reduced to trying to select the lesser of evils. You expressed disgust with the manner in which political dialogue in this country has been reduced to thirty-second sound bites most of which seek to vilify the opposition rather than clarify positions. You expressed doubt about the ability of government to accomplish anything positive, especially given the fact that the political process is dominated by special interest monies and the politicians are more concerned with reelection than with principles. And in an expression of your deep concern you indicated that your energies would be better spent in areas in which you could make a positive difference. Indeed one of you said that rather than spend energy in the political arena, attempting to shape public policy, you and your family regularly prepared sandwiches and distributed them to the homeless and the hungry in the inner city. You contrasted this concrete activity with all the posturing around legislative acts and administrative decrees.

You caught my attention for two reasons. The first was the clear concern reflected in your voices and the obvious thought which you have been giving to some of the important issues of the day. The second, and more compelling, was that I have long shared the sense of frustration which you have expressed. Since I am now firmly ensconced among the chronologically challenged, I have a long history with the frustrations, disappointments and disillusionment you reflect. I have been choosing the lesser to two

evils for longer than most of you have been alive. Think about it for a moment: I have been asked to choose between Goldwater and Johnson, between Nixon and Humphrey, Nixon and McGovern, Ford and Carter, between Carter and Reagan, Reagan and Mondale, Bush and Dukakis, between Bush and Clinton and now Clinton and Dole. Most of my life, my vote has been cast against, rather than in support of someone. And there have been times when I did not know until I stood in the voting booth just precisely how I would vote. And there have been many times when I have been tempted not to vote, remembering the waggish admonition: "Don't vote; it only encourages them."

I have also lived through the period when television has transformed the political campaign. As a child, I sat with my Aunt and Uncle and listened to the radio as Roosevelt and Dewey and then Truman and Dewey campaigned in lengthy and intimate ways. As a student, too young to vote, I gave my political allegiance to Adlai Stevenson and to his urbane and witty and thoughtful campaign speeches. I watched the first of the televised presidential debates and, though young and inexperienced, recognized that something profoundly different had just happened. And over the years, the demeaning of the political discussion has continued apace, much to my deep disappointment.

And yes, over the years, government has disappointed me repeatedly. As a young man I dared to believe that the challenges we faced were all surmountable. I believed that government could make a positive contribution toward ending the racism which has dishonored this nation from its very inception. I believed that government has a significant role to play in curbing greed and arrogance and in ensuring a more equitable distribution of the resources of this nation so that poverty and penury and want need not shadow our existence as a community. I believed that government had the power and the responsibility to protect those who could not protect themselves. I believed that government could make a positive difference in the lives of the vast majority of people.

Sometimes I looked to one branch of government and sometimes to another. At one time or another I pinned my hope on the administration, on the Senate, on the House, on the Courts, on regulatory agencies, even on the bureaucracy. And over and over again, I have seen one season's accomplishments undermined by a reversal of political fortunes, and crippling compromises destroy a generation of effort. Looking back to the bright hopes of my youth, I confess that most of what I worked for has not come true.

And yet, my young friends, I continue to vote. I have not opted out of the political process. In a climate where the choices are too often between unpalatable alternatives, where voting for a third party seems the functional equivalent of not voting at all, I continue to vote. Listening to the radio report concerning your disillusionment and your inclination to just sit out this election, I found myself challenged, wondering why I continue to regard participation in the political process a moral, perhaps even a religious duty.

To begin with, I belong to a religious movement which holds as one of its seven fundamental principles a commitment to the use of the democratic process both within our congregations and in the world at large. For a long time I found that commitment a

curious item for inclusion in a statement of religious principles. But over time I have come to understand that the democratic process is not just a conventional way to structure a community's polity; it is also a moral statement of how best to live in a world dominated not by black and white but by infinite shades of gray.

You see, the democratic process is most important precisely at those moments when the ideal is not an option, when we are presented with flawed alternatives, when what we want is not available to us and we must decide what is the best we can get. If the choice were between absolute good and absolute evil, between absolute wisdom and absolute folly, between full competence and total ineptitude, we would scarcely need an election. The vast majority of people would instinctively gravitate toward the ideal and the choice would be a foregone conclusion.

But in real life, that is not how it happens. In real life we must carefully weigh the positive and the negative, the opportunities and the dangers, the strengths and the weaknesses of the alternatives with which we are confronted, and then, in fear and trembling, cast our vote for the better of the two or for the lesser evil, knowing that no matter how it comes out, at some level it will represent both a victory and a defeat, knowing that win or lose, we will remain in community and struggle together with the consequences of our choices and in behalf of our differing visions.

The democratic process is a moral undertaking precisely because it is rooted in a deep faith that ordinary people, making choices on the basis of the best judgment available to them--be it full knowledge of the issues, personal experience with government, theoretical understanding of politics, judgments about personal interests or simple intuition--are less likely to walk us down a blind alley. The democratic process has built into it the possibility of change, of reform, of renewal, of regeneration precisely because few of its decisions are irrevocable and precisely because the coalitions which win elections are forever shifting and are always victims of their own success. Democratic process can make mistakes, but it retains the ability to recover from misjudgements.

One curious thing about a democracy is that there is no way to opt out of the process. To refuse to choose is to choose. To refuse to participate because the choice is between the lesser two evils is not to escape involvement in evil, but to assume a curious responsibility for it. Failure to vote always aligns one with the winning side whether we wish it or not, precisely because we failed to express our own opinion and thus, by default, acquiesced in the majority decision. The bumper-stickers which say, "Don't blame me, I voted for the opposition," have a curious legitimacy to them. A bumper sticker which read, "Don't blame me, I didn't vote!" would be illogical. The non-voter cannot escape blame; the non-voter in a democracy carries a special responsibility for the kind of government we have. And so, my young Americans, despite decades of being disappointed in the candidates, I still vote.

What is more, I vote because I still believe that government has a positive role to play in the lives of ordinary citizens. I know how very frustrating it can be to see problems persist in spite of major governmental efforts to confront them. For example, it is very

fashionable these days to complain that despite decades of welfare programs, there are still vast numbers of poor people, including some who seem to have made a career of subsisting on the public fisc. It is very fashionable to insist that because poverty has not been eliminated and because not everyone has found regular employment, the welfare program is a failure. What we have failed to understand is that government programs like welfare were never intended to be curative but rather ameliorative. Welfare was designed to provide a basic support for those people who, for whatever reason--personal inadequacy, illness, incompetence, misadventure, or other circumstances--find it impossible to flourish in the highly competitive atmosphere of our capitalist system. It was an expression of our corporate and mutual responsibility for those among us least able to protect themselves, sustain themselves, make a way for themselves. Its function was not to reduce the number of people dependent upon the program but rather to affirm that there is a basic level of subsistence beneath which we cannot, in good conscience, allow any of fellow citizens to fall, that in a democracy, we have a compact with each other which requires a government response to human needs and human failings.

Undoubtedly, it marks me as something of a dinosaur--a liberal dinosaur at that, but I still believe that government, if it is to be just and if it is to be legitimate, must meet this expectation. I know that this flies in the face of the fashionable demand for smaller government. Frankly, I am not interested in smaller government. In a world in which economic power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few, in which powerful international corporations evade any kind of regulation, it is difficult to understand how smaller government will serve our best interests. It is even more difficult to understand, in an era of growing, global concentration of power in the hands of people who are elected by no one and who are responsible primarily to the bottom line, to an ethic of greed, how government will be more effective when its powers have been dispersed among fifty statehouses. I am not persuaded that government should be smaller. I am persuaded that it should be more efficient and more effective. And I am persuaded that it must reassert its function as protector of those least able to protect themselves.

It is part of the conventional wisdom to contrast concrete acts of charity with the bumbling, fumbling bureaucracy through which the government functions. Who can doubt that giving a sandwich to a hungry man or shelter to a homeless woman and her children is an important moral act. It seems so much more effective and efficient than any government program. It responds to the immediate need in a concrete way. And certainly one feels a great deal better for having participated personally in responding to another's need. I would not, for a moment, question the importance of responding immediately to the needs of another as we confront them. Indeed, such a response represents a moral imperative.

It is necessary, but it is not sufficient. To hand out sandwiches to the hungry and not challenge a system which regularly produces hungry women and men as a by-product of its operation, or to fail to question one's own complicity in that system; to distribute blankets to the homeless and fail to demand public policies which cease to produce homeless women and men; to clothe the naked with our cast-off clothing and fail to insist that there be a corporate response to an immoral maldistribution of wealth and resources

is to use the suffering of others to cleanse our own consciences.

I believe in private charity. I believe that compassion demands it of us. But I also believe that justice requires that we confront a system which allows us to be the generous benefactors to the needy, the outcast, the hopeless and helpless which that same system steadily creates. And that requires a vision which understands that government can and must play a positive role in the lives of its citizens, a vision which demands that government be large enough, and strong enough, and efficient enough and focused enough and well enough financed to meet that obligation. And so, despite decades of deep disappointment, I continue to vote and I use my vote to support those candidates who seem to serve some part of my vision of positive government, of moral and compassionate policies, of a more just and merciful society.

And finally, I continue to vote as an expression of my irrepressible optimism in a world which often seems hopeless and beyond saving. As Norman Cousins once commented, I remain optimistic primarily because I do not know enough to be a pessimist. The world has a continuing ability to surprise and astound. Triumphs are rarely as complete as I hope; defeats are rarely as devastating as I fear; things rarely work out as I expect. New possibilities are forever emerging out of the deeply patterned chaos which is our world. And my faith is tied to that emergent, unpredictable possibility.

And so, in some curious way, voting is for me a spiritual act. Precisely because the democratic system, by its very nature, is chaotic, throwing up new coalitions, new challenges, new possibilities it offers a concrete example of the fact that revelation is not sealed; that out of our fears and our hopes, our successes and our failures, our follies and our triumphs new possibilities emerge: Against all odds, Richard Nixon goes to China; Lyndon Johnson dreams of a great society; Franklin Roosevelt seeks to rescue the poor from the system which made him rich. Democracy is an organic process and like life itself is capable of infinite permutations and possibilities. I do not know what possibilities lie hidden in the choices I am asked to make or what consequences will emerge from the process of choosing. In voting, I am part of a process I do not fully understand, cannot control, and cannot predict--a process which confounds my fears and hopes alike. In voting I enter into the mystic community of women and men who, out of fear and hope, prejudice and knowledge, wisdom and ignorance, insight and instinct, help to shape a future which few of us could predict but which is almost always richer and more challenging than we dared hope.

And so, my young friends, I vote because it is a civic duty. I vote because it affirms my participation in the community. I vote because faith in the democratic process is a structural component of my religious values. I vote because I believe in government and its ability to serve humane purposes. I vote because I am constrained to exercise whatever influence I may have in behalf of a just society and a merciful social order. I vote as an act of faith in the unseen possibilities which emerge from the deep patterning of the implicate order.

And so, my young friends, I would urge you to vote, to enter into the uncertainty and

confusion of a world in which moral purity is a rare commodity, in which choices are often between the lesser of evils, in which the challenge is to know how to compromise without being compromised. Whether you wish it or not, you are part of the body politic in this country. Whether you wish it or not, you share responsibility for the government and its policies. You cannot wash your hands of that responsibility. But you can act responsibly and morally. You can enter into the uncertainties of the process and add your modest weight to the process by which we chart an uncertain course into the future. You will not always prevail, but you cannot escape involvement.

Should I convince you of the necessity of active participation in the democratic process, perhaps it would help you to keep in mind these words which I have sometimes quoted to myself as I have exercised the franchise; I do not know who wrote them, but they seem appropriate to the occasion:

You say the little efforts that I make will do no good:  
They never will prevail to tip the scale  
Where justice hangs in balance.  
I don't think  
I ever thought they would.  
But I am prejudiced beyond debate  
In favor of my right to choose which side  
Shall feel the stubborn ounces  
of my weight!