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Civic Vision: Seeing the Invisible on the Path to a Just Society
Connecticut College Baccalaureate Address
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May 18, 2013

During the mid-2000's, when I was a professor at St. Lawrence University, I collaborated with the Mohawk Nation and every semester for six years offered an undergraduate service learning seminar on Native American Children and Youth. The class was held on the St. Regis Reservation at Akwasasne in upstate New York and on the first day of the course, we'd fill two vans with about 20 or so first-year students and set off to "the Rez," which was about 40 miles northeast from the university. And, every semester, on that first day, as I watched the students board the vans, I couldn't help but wonder where this journey was going to take us.

En route, I typically sat in the front passenger seat taking in the natural beauty of northern New York that sadly served as a backdrop for the economic struggles typical of this country's small towns and farming communities. Houses in disrepair and sagging barns dotted the landscape. Just about an hour after departure, we arrived at the reservation and I turned to watch the facial expressions of my students. Typically, there was no change, at which point I would announce, "We're Here; We're on the Rez!!"

The announcement was received by a collection of quizzical, befuddled, confused looks. A few put their faces closer to the window, as if that might somehow offer them a better view of what they were not seeing. Others looked ahead, squinting in the hopes that what they had come to see was just up the road. But, alas, what they saw were gas stations, cigarette discount stores, a few outdoor shopping centers, an old abandoned warehouse that once served as a bingo hall, still more gas stations and discount cigarette stores and a scattering of sterile looking structures that housed tribal offices. The people on the street looked pretty ordinary, most were wearing the same type of clothes they wore, had similar hairstyles to their own and everybody spoke English.

Eventually, the students would fall back in their seats, looks of befuddlement replaced by disappointment. A few minutes later, we pulled into the parking lot of Akwasasne Boys and Girls Club, which would serve as our classroom for the day and the semester; it was a structure that looked just like what it once was - an old cigarette warehouse. As usual, during the first class of the semester, I would engage the class in discussion of their initial reactions to Akwasasne. In no time at all, it became painfully obvious that what they were looking for - "real Indians" - were nowhere to be found. And, indeed, they were right, the "real Indians" they were looking for did not exist because their expectations reflected this country's image of native people - they were looking for Tonto.

They had assumed that they would see people wearing feathers, beads, moccasins, breastplates and sitting bareback on horses. Later, some would admit quite sheepishly that they expected to see teepees or, at the very least, someone with a Mohawk haircut. They didn't expect to see people who looked a lot like them. Thus, the excitement of meeting "the exotic" was quickly

dashed and replaced by a difficult introspection that was based on questions posed by that day's reading, a selection from "The Call to Service" by Robert Coles, about what they believed, why they believed it and how those beliefs affected people, like Native Americans, who have become invisible in this society.

At the end of class, when it was time to work with the children and adolescents at the club, my students were quickly disarmed of another assumption: that they were there to selflessly offer their considerable skills and talents to these Mohawk youth, whose lives could only benefit from their generosity. Upon meeting the youth for the first time, however, they were welcomed with looks of indifference, impatience, annoyance or sometimes just a blank stare coupled with comment such as, "What do you want?" "Who are you?" "Would you get out of the way?" "You're here to do what???" At that point, my students felt like they just had a bucket of ice water dumped on their heads. I'm pretty sure that if they had been just a little bit younger, they would have verbalized what they felt: "I wanna go home."

But, they did not go home – I had the keys to the van. They stayed; and, slowly they began to immerse themselves (to the degree that they would be allowed) into Mohawk life on the reservation. Over time – and, this took years, as one cohort's experience would build on those of previous cohorts – they began to see what was previously invisible. But, that wasn't easy to do: they had to unlearn most of what they had been taught, seen or heard about native peoples; they had to confront their own biases though honest reflexivity; and, they had to do something that Americans don't like to do, they had to stop on the path they were on, go back and rethink where they had been and where they were going.

They had to engage in honest and open dialogue with the Mohawk and, through that dialogue, they learned to ask the tough questions. But, I would also add that they learned what the tough questions were – and that the answers, which were not always pleasant, taught them as much about themselves as they did about the Mohawk.

And, so, the invisible slowly became visible; what, at first, appeared ordinary, was now problematic and troubling. Akwasasne was now an intensely contested transnational space where two Nations, Canada and the United States, imposed a national border that cut right through the reservation. They saw a place where both countries facilitated and supported the placement of paper mills, aluminum processing plants and other industries that would dump their waste into what was once the St. Lawrence River; but since the bottom of the river was dredged, the "Seaway" had become a "toxic pond" where the poisons from years of industrial waste has seeped into the bedrock, resulting in the devastation of the culture and fishing economy of the Mohawk.

It was with great shock and sadness that they learned that the traditional Mohawk Elders continued to fish and would die from food poisoning; that pregnant women give birth to children with severe disabilities and, they, too, would die; and that their parents, whose economic wellbeing was severely constrained by the blatant disregard of Mohawk sovereignty by both the United States and Canada, typically found themselves involved the dangerous world of

smuggling and they, also, would usually end up dead. But, they did not learn of these tragedies from a book or a class lecture, they were introduced to this by the Mohawk themselves.

By spending time and sharing experiences, by engaging in honest and open dialogue, and by working together in the spirit of reciprocity and equality, they began to see, to feel, and perhaps to understand the injustices faced by those who were once invisible to them. Now, with a civic vision, they proceeded to a newer path than the one they started out on. This path was thorny, bumpy and neither smooth nor straight. But, it was a good path, the right path, as it was the one that led to a more just society.

This past spring, I once again watched a group of students get into a van to make the trek to a Native American reservation. This time, however, it was a group of Connecticut College students and the reservation was that of the Eastern Pequot. But, as always, I stood back from the van and wondered where this journey was going to lead us.