

RADICAL TEACHER

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Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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by Janet Zandy



ELEANOR ROOSEVELT HOLDING THE UDHR

"What is your greatest fear?"

"I fear leaving college and not being able to find a job and working at McDonald's the rest of my life."

The technologically-determined and career-focused private university where I teach has state of the arts programs in photography, computer science, new media, and many permutations of engineering, but no undergraduate or graduate degrees in English or history. The quarter system is unforgiving and, not unrelated, retention is a major concern. Art students hope for their big break and information technologists worry about finding required co-ops. Everyone knows that the real money these days -- for grants, research funding -- is in some manifestation of homeland security.

In this climate, teaching in the liberal arts is a refuge and a challenge. One of those challenges is a theme centered Senior Seminar course that all students must take if they wish to graduate. The present theme is Globalization, Human Rights, and Citizenship. I like teaching this course even though I know that many students dislike this requirement, and some are outright belligerent and hostile to it. I think of the course as taking students where they do not necessarily want to go and I assign a variety of texts, films, lectures, even comics to open dialogic spaces for perceiving the intersection of globalization, human rights, and citizenship. I want them to question how their training for jobs fits into a larger geo-political and humanistic space, but I have to find subtle ways to get there or they will stubbornly and predictably shut down. And, so, I practice a variant of samizdat pedagogy.

I always begin with a central, grounding document: the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Almost all students have never seen it before or heard of it. It is a useful pedagogical troublemaker. From the start, a vocal minority of students make it clear: human rights are not a given. At first glance, their response (invariably from highly technical, white, suburban males) highlights the distance between those protesting in anti-capitalist globalization demonstrations and those programming the security systems that sustain the Patriot Act, the prison system, as well as the more mundane slow passage through any airport. Some -- not all -- of these technologically sophisticated and outspoken students champion a social Darwinism of survival of the fittest, an ideology of choice without any consideration of circumstances. Or, in the words of one student, "people have a right to go after water, but no one is entitled to it."

Many students see the Declaration of Human Rights as an idealistic but meaningless document, well intentioned, but irrelevant. Some are quick to point out its inconsistencies, indeterminacies (their meaning, my term). At first, few recognize it as a heuristic for centering human actuality, for examining issues of contemporary slavery,

international labor conditions, rights of women and children, and the economic impact of undemocratic capitalist globalization -- until they start to apply it to their own lives and fears. I inform them that many non-Western members of the United Nations such as Iran, China, Egypt, and Lebanon participated in the drafting of this document, as well as nations in the Western and Soviet-Bloc countries, and I explain how it emerged with Eleanor Roosevelt's prodding out of the trauma of war and was viewed by her as a threshold document, an "international magna carta." What I don't say is that I offer it as an imaginary for another world.

This text -- 30 articles approved by the UN General Assembly -- is a catalyst for gathering and connecting the filaments of students' own experiences to the actualities of global capital. Each student must choose and respond to one article. For example, Article 9, "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile," leads us to a discussion of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. Article 15, "Everyone has a right to a nationality," evokes a discussion of migration and exile, of literally existing in a condition "without papers." Article 29, "Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible," raises questions about the responsibilities of corporations and businesses to local communities. And Article 23, "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment," speaks to them because they fear the outsourcing of their recently acquired technical skills and almost all know someone whose job succumbed to corporate downsizing.

Out of this modest exercise, patterns of concern emerge. Then we make a leap, and I ask them to write responses to three questions: What do you fear? What is the greatest global problem? What would you do if you were a citizen-activist? In the small drama of this brief ten-week course, their responses, read anonymously and aloud, reflect back to them the possibilities inherent in themselves. Large numbers name hunger and poverty as primary problems. They fear failure and loss and almost all recognize environmental perils. Some go further and speak to the "concentration of so much wealth and power in the hands of a few people; [and] the lengths to which these people go to protect their wealth and power and accumulate more." And, "money over humanity." One observes, "the greatest global problem: Lack of concern for global problems." No text can claim the power of progressive revolution these Orwellian days, but the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a critical reminder of new vision and hope after the trauma of war. Many students want alternatives to cynicism and political paralysis. And some, a very few, are ready to act.



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