

May 20, 2015

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Arthur Camins ♥ Become a fan
Director, Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science
Education, Stevens Institute of Technology



We Can Be Better Than the Audacity of Small Hopes

Posted: 05/14/2015 6:47 pm EDT | Updated: 05/14/2015 6:59 pm EDT

The United States is suffering through the audacity of small hopes. In the shadow of the Great Recession and after several decades of increasing wealth disparity in the United States, the politically and financially powerful have the audacity to call upon the nation to accept small dreams. Nowhere is this more evident than in the pathetically small hope that consequential testing and competition -- among parents for entry into charter schools, among schools for students, and among teachers for pay increases -- can lead to substantial education improvement and be a solution to poverty.

There were times when our dreams were big. They can be again. The times demand it. A look back at what values and actions have broadened access to a decent life for all can illuminate a path toward greater equity in the future.

Images of workers on breadlines in the 1930s and of fire-hosed civil rights demonstrators in the 1960s catalyzed moral outrage and direct action leading to big dreams and substantive progress toward equality and equity for all Americans.

The popular depression-era song [Brother Can You Spare a Dime](#) struck a responsive cord as it called out the moral incongruity of "dreamers"-workers and soldiers- needing to beg in order to survive.

They used to tell me I was building a dream... Why should I be standing in line just waiting for bread?

Current political rhetoric still harkens to the American dream, but with growing inequality and stagnant wages, the words to Brother Can You Spare a Dime remain depressingly resonant.

To be clear, it was not the leadership, noblesse oblige or largesse of the powerful that led to improvement in people's lives in the decades after the Great Depression. Nor was it individuals competing with one another for their personal chance to climb the economic ladder. It was the values, vision, direct action, and political pressure of the labor movement- embodied in the song, [Solidarity Forever](#)- that pushed legislators to enact a new deal to address the needs of a nation that President Roosevelt called, "[ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished](#)."

*Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one,
For the union makes us strong.*

The political response to collective action in the 1930s was the Work Progress Administration (WPA) that put millions of unemployed American to work rebuilding the nation, the Social Security Act that ensured that retirees would not be destitute, and the National Labor Relations Act that secured workers' right to organize and bargain collectively for humane working conditions, benefits and fair wages.

It was also the values and collective action of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s that enabled legislators to summon the moral and political courage to pass the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968, outlawing most forms of racial segregation and providing equal housing opportunities regardless of race, creed, or national origin. It was civil disobedience and mass action that compelled Congress to enact the Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawing discrimination at the polling place. And it was also the continued strength of unions that led to Medicare and Medicaid, Food Stamps, Head Start and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that were passed to directly mediate poverty.

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The anthem of the civil rights movement was not, I will get ahead, but We Shall Overcome. The vehicle for "[bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice](#)" was not winning competitions with neighbors or winning a competition with fellow workers for merit bonuses, but rather walking hand-in-hand.

Maybe the most important historical lesson is that only mass collective action guided by a moral vision will pressure elected leaders to prioritize the interest of the many over the selfish demands of the few. Hence, the claims of the empowered to be leading the charge to reduce poverty through their version of education reform should be taken with a healthy grain of salt. An additional lesson is that while the seeds of past triumphs for greater equality and equity were planted through local action, it was only when community engagement culminated in national legislation or Supreme Court rulings that progress was fully realized and secured.

Unfortunately, those lessons have been obscured through decades of concerted propagandizing. Purposeful underfunding has reenergized the canard that government cannot be a force for general wellbeing. Once again, states rights, long the thinly veiled defense of segregation, is morally acceptable as political posturing. We need bigger, better hopes and dreams.

In contrast to the collective spirit of previous social and economic justice efforts, the core value of current education reform policies is individual advancement. In fact, its advocates seek to undermine collective action, democracy and community responsibility. They explicitly accept the notion of improvement for the few at the expense of the many. This value is reflected in idea that parents should secure their children's future by competing for a slot in a charter school. It is evident in the idea that teachers will work harder and smarter when they compete to achieve better student scores than their colleagues in order to receive a financial reward.

None of the advances of the past eight decades were achieved without struggle. Each major advance for broad social justice and economic wellbeing met with fierce resistance- framed as an overreaching government imposing solutions in violation of individual rights. Similarly, advocacy for charter schools and vouchers is framed as the personal right to choose a school. Public schools are called government schools, as if that were a pejorative notion or accusingly attacked as a public education monopoly.

However, there is push back against the forces of inequity. Stirring of progressive political action abound in struggles for marriage equality and immigration rights, protests against school closings, and increasing acts of civil disobedience as parent opt-out of the misuse of standardized tests. Public disaffection with growing inequality surfaced briefly during the energizing but politically inchoate Occupy Wall Street demonstrations and in the diversity of protesters following a string of unpunished and egregiously unjustified police killings of young Black men.

However, these actions have yet to capture sufficient public attention and energy to fuel a mass movement with a unifying resonant message. We do not yet have a Solidarity Forever or We Shall Overcome that embodies the spirit of collective action for our time.

The movements of our recent past -- unions, civil rights, anti-war, women's rights, immigrant rights, and now environmental health and sustainable development, marriage equality, and education equity -- have each sought to repair and strengthen threads that bind together the fabric of our nation. However, the accomplishments of each movement have been diminished because their fulfillment is not just about the

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threads. Substantial lasting progress is about the strength and tightness of the weave. We need to address the whole cloth.

We can be better than the audacity of small hopes. The next anthem for equity needs to include the unifying theme: We're in this together for jobs, justice, and equitable education.

Follow Arthur Camins on Twitter: www.twitter.com/arthurcamins

Arthur H. Camins is the Director of the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education at Stevens Institute of Technology. He has taught and been an administrator in New York City, Massachusetts and Louisville, Kentucky. The views expressed in this article are his alone.