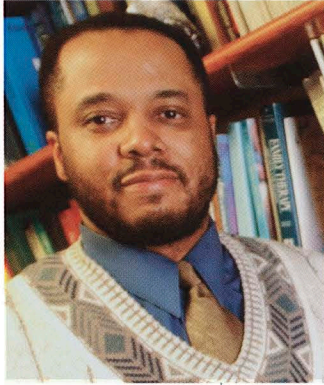


Perspectives



GIVING BACK OUR GIFTS

BY KEITH ALFORD

As an academician, I am surrounded by experts from a variety of disciplines. We all will surely make our mark in this world, but we will also need to find time to give back and contribute our gifts so others may benefit. This realization is nothing new. Americans have a rich tradition of giving back and helping others, but Robert Putnam reminds us in *Bowling Alone* (Simon & Schuster, 2000) that contributing and giving of one's time in service to others should not be taken for granted. It is a cause that needs revitalization. The African proverb, "I am because we are and because we are therefore I am," speaks to the interconnectedness we share as members of a society and how interdependent we really are.

I am reminded of the story of Oseola McCarty, the 87-year-old woman whose life's work was washing and ironing other people's clothes. After deciding to retire in the mid-1990s due to arthritis in her hands, Miss McCarty, who lived frugally all her life, made the unselfish decision to donate her life's savings of \$150,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi so that scholarships could go to students who need them. "I want to help somebody's child go to college," she was quoted as saying. "I just want the money to go to someone who will appreciate it and learn. I'm old and I'm not going to live always." Oseola McCarty, a quiet, shy washerwoman, died in September 1999 at age 91, but her legacy of contributing and giving back lives on through an endowed scholarship that bears her name at the University of Southern Mississippi. I cannot think of a more heartfelt example of selfless stewardship and uncompromising altruism.

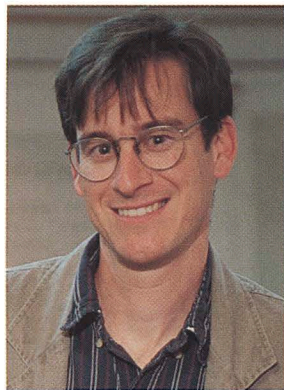
Financial contributions are always welcomed, but passing on what has been given to us in the form of a service activity pays remarkable dividends. Never did I find this more true than when I was asked to help facilitate an inner-city pre-teen girls' group for a social service agency in Syracuse. My first reaction was one of frustration. I honestly believed I did not have the time, given my professorial responsibilities at the University. I also wondered how effective I could be with a group of young girls, when my experience in this area had only been with adolescent male and adult therapy groups. The social services supervisor continued to request my help, so I finally consented. She

said: "You see, Dr. Alford, these girls have not had a lot of positive experiences with males, and they don't feel very good about themselves." After the 10-week group period ended, I concluded that this had been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Not only did I proactively use my group facilitation skills, but I also struck a chord through empowering the self-esteem of each group member. Ironically, the lesson for me was not so much that I had given back something to them, but that they had made an enormous contribution to me. These streetwise girls taught me a lot about the struggles of survival and the extraordinary courage they maintain in the face of overwhelming socioeconomic odds. I, in turn, discovered that the reciprocal nature of contributing is truly an added bonus.

I appreciate the words of Wayne Muller, author of *How, Then, Shall We Live?* (Bantam Books, 1997), who said each of us has a gift to share with the family of Earth. He said some of us wish to wait until our gift is potent and comprehensive enough to solve all the world's problems. Seeing that our strength or talent does not stop all the suffering, we decide it is inadequate. However, each of us holds a small portion of the light and we can thrive, he said, only if we each bring what we have and offer it at the family table. That means reaching out to your neighbor on the south end of town, or a fellow parishioner in your house of worship, or a foster child eager to receive mentoring from a caring adult.

Today, more than ever before, we must do our part and give back to a world that once so richly gave to us. The state of the world is very different from what it was two years ago. Suicidal and homicidal terror has become our primary concern. The horrific events of September 11, 2001, left this nation dazed as we gasped at the reality that America was under attack. Despite this tragedy, the human spirit prevailed, and we began to see what contributing was all about. Hundreds of operations have aided the victims of 9/11; but just as meaningful are the people of America who regularly offer their time and energy to such humanitarian causes as befriending a senior citizen, helping out with violence prevention programs, and becoming involved with cancer, sickle cell anemia, or HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns. These efforts solidify this country's foundation and promote that which is good. However, we must not become complacent. Strengthening our social capital takes commitment and perseverance. Service to community is a part of our civic responsibility, and we must be careful to do our part and—as the late social work scholar Harry Specht put it—not become unfaithful angels.

Keith Alford, Ph.D., is a professor in the School of Social Work in the College of Human Services and Health Professions. His research has focused on National Rites of Passage Institute programs for African American youth, and he was a contributor to Educating Our Black Children (RoutledgeFalmer, 2001).



IS CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE A FORM OF TERRORISM?

BY DON MITCHELL

Throughout the 20th century, the history of free speech and assembly could be read as one of progressive liberalization. Before mid-century, the Supreme Court was little interested in the First Amendment and typically did not interfere with state and local governments' arrests of radical speakers, or with their breaking up of political meetings with which they disapproved. And during World War I, the Supreme Court approved of the federal government's wholesale arrest of socialists and other radicals who opposed the draft. Beginning in the 1930s, however, the Supreme Court finally recognized that people had the right to assemble in public to engage in political agitation, that striking workers had the right to picket, and that—unless the state's security was immediately threatened—even revolutionary speech could not be prohibited.

But it would be more accurate to see this progressive liberalization as a response to ongoing civil disobedience. Radical workers continually broke laws designed to disallow their assemblies, speeches, and picketing (which the Supreme Court defined as illegal intimidation). Communists, socialists, and others continued to write, speak, and agitate, despite laws against their ideologies. Civil rights activists, of course, were often the most diligent in their disobedience of laws designed to regulate where they could gather in public space. And antiwar activists in the 1910s—no less than the 1960s—purposely broke laws to force governments to reconsider not only policies, but also the laws regulating protests.

The use of civil disobedience to influence governmental policy—and even to seek to transform government itself—is a grand American tradition. In response to ongoing defiance of bans on speech and assembly, the Supreme Court stated in 1939 that “wherever the title of the streets and parks may rest, they have immemorially been held in trust for the use of the public and, time out of mind, have been used for purposes of assembly, communicating thoughts between citizens, and discussing public questions.”

This was not strictly true, since the mere discussion of public questions on American streets often led to agitators getting their heads beaten in, but the ruling established that public spaces are vital political spaces: The politics of the street have often been critically important in changing America. The Supreme Court, however, also said that the

right to speech and assembly in public space must always be “exercised in subordination to the general comfort and convenience, and in consonance with peace and good order.”

To assure this subordination, the court oversaw the development of the Public Forum Doctrine, which established guidelines within which governments may restrict speech and assembly. These guidelines include restrictions on the time, place, and manner of protests.

Recent protests against national political conventions, the World Trade Organization, and the World Bank; a labor strike at Denver International Airport; and a controversy concerning protest at a California shopping mall show how the Public Forum Doctrine may even more effectively silence dissident political speech than its earlier outright repression ever did. (For more information, see “The Liberalization of Free Speech: Or, How Protest in Public Space is Silenced,” *Stanford Agora*, Spring 2003 [www.lawschool.stanford.edu/agora/].)

While the court makes clear that speech and assembly cannot be regulated on the basis of a speech's political content, its promotion of spatial regulation has allowed protesters to be pushed so far from their intended audiences that they cannot effectively be heard. If protest and dissident voices are to be effective once again, the grand tradition of American civil disobedience needs to be revived.

But—and this is a big but—civil disobedience may now carry consequences far beyond what it ever did before. The Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001 (USA PATRIOT Act), passed within six weeks of the September 11 terrorist attacks, might very well define civil disobedience as terrorism. Among its many provisions, the USA PATRIOT Act outlaws “acts dangerous to human life that are in violation of the criminal laws,” if they “appear to be intended...to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion” and “occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.” Of course the whole point of protest is to influence government policy through coercion. Civil disobedience frequently violates criminal laws and occasionally involves “acts dangerous to human life.” Unfriendly police and unsympathetic courts, therefore, could very well define protest that includes civil disobedience as terrorism.

Where protesters in the past may have been charged with misdemeanors, they could now, conceivably, be charged with being terrorists. Is this the sort of political world we want to construct? Is this really all the respect we have for the long tradition of political dissidence in America, a tradition that lies behind everything from the Boston Tea Party and the women's suffrage movement, to radical abolitionism and AIDS activism? Is this really how we want to define those opposed to American policies and actions? Is that really how we want to define a “USA Patriot”?

Don Mitchell, Ph.D., a geography professor in the Maxwell School, is director of the People's Geography Project and a MacArthur Fellow. He is the author of The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space (Guilford Publishers, 2003).