



Introduction

Dear Ms. Fox.

I am a fan of your work. I grew up an avid activist and have always been very passionate about making a difference within my community. The past few years, I have been focused on prisoner rights, mostly juvenile prisoners. As I'm sure you know, in the United States, and especially in the State of Michigan, putting juveniles in adult prisons for life without the option of parole is a very big problem. I would like to do an independent study/anthropological research project on the issue in hopes I can show people that locking these kids up for life and not giving them the opportunities that can help them lead a better life and make a difference in their community is wrong. I have made a connection to the prisons and am waiting to hear back to see if I can plan a timeline of dates for interviewing, observing, studying, etc.

What I need now is an adviser to help me with this. I cannot do it alone, it is too big a project and to be honest, it's not about getting credit for me. This is more to me than school—this is what I want to do with my life and I want to do it now. When I find an issue I believe in, I will do anything to make sure that I can help and follow through. I want to make a difference and I want to prove that I can be a good anthropologist.

I know you're not a professor of anthropology, but you are someone who teaches about making a difference in the world and about peace, and someone who I look up to for that. I am asking you for help; if you know of anybody who would advise me, or if you could even be my adviser, or even give me pointers, I would appreciate it sincerely.

This e-mail arrived while I was immersed in my own research project on social justice education and the Millennial generation. I was touched by this student's energy, her intense desire to "make a difference," her willingness to contact a faculty member she had only read about online, and her youthful sense of urgency—this is what I want to do with my life and I want to do it now—all of which, I thought, was emblematic of the Millennial students I was reading about—and whom I had taught for the last ten years at the University of Michigan.

Shortly after the turn of the century, some of the long-time faculty started noticing something different about the students showing up in our classes and coming to us for advice. While my courses in human rights, race and racism, nonviolence, and development in the Global South had attracted many outstanding students in the past, these young people were particularly bold in their belief that they could plunge right in and solve the world's problems. Some of them had impressive résumés right out of high school: internships abroad and community service at home, perhaps starting a chapter of Amnesty International, or organizing a concert to raise money for cancer research or a children's hospital. By their third or fourth year in college, many of these students had been involved in a dizzying array of social justice activities on and off campus, often in leadership roles, while still maintaining a high grade point average. One of my advisees, for example, was double majoring in Creative Writing and Social Theory and Practice (writing an honors thesis for each) and, in her spare time, had planned and facilitated weekly writing workshops for Michigan prisoners, coordinated campus conferences on immigration rights, organized Latina workers fighting labor abuses, tutored low-income Spanish-speaking women, and organized volunteers and participants in an after-school tutoring program for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth. And that was only the beginning. She had also organized a grief support network for students, given public lectures on prison reform, and, at graduation, she was working on an entirely new project: a prison museum, "conceptually analogous to the Holocaust Museum," she told me. Visitors would be assigned the identity of an actual inmate and walked through that individual's life and prison experience in order to give the public a

fuller sense of their humanity and the complexity of their situations. She is twenty-two years old.

No longer is it unusual to hear of an undergraduate who has raised thousands of dollars to build a school in a Kenyan slum where she had worked over her summer vacation—right after she completed an internship with the United Nations. Nor is it surprising that a couple of undergrads would team up to organize and staff a program in Ecuador, complete with courses, readings, home stays, and field trips, so their fellow students could learn about global poverty firsthand. I even had a sophomore who led a team of physicians and graduate students to Vietnam, his parents' home country, to research health problems and advise the Vietnamese government on best hospital practices. Clearly, this kind of student engagement was different from my own experience in the 1960s, when as one of the early Peace Corps Volunteers I had embarked on an adventure to a remote corner of India with a vague notion of helping out. It was different, too, from the single-minded determination of the students who had marched in Selma, or had massed by the hundreds of thousands to protest the Vietnam War. This new kind of student activism seemed to be built on brash individual initiative, the confidence to pick up the phone and make things happen, an entrepreneurship for the good of others that valued immediate action over words, or context, or history.

As Millennial students started arriving in our social justice courses with their grand plans to change the world, instructors were also noticing, somewhat paradoxically, that they seemed to have a greater need for structure, an insistence on detailed explanations of the assignments and exactly how their work would be evaluated. Faculty who preferred a looser, more reflective classroom, with discussion rather than lecture and questions to which there were no right answers, were met with student frustration and, at times, a troubling insistence that teachers should present more facts and examples leading to definite conclusions that they could reproduce on papers and tests, rather than asking them to consider for themselves what those facts might mean. They were good workers: quick, efficient learners, polite, and willing. Yet they seemed reluctant to express points of view that might differ from those of their peers, or stray

very far from their idea of "what the teacher wants." Many of them were energized by calls for swift, immediate action: Stop the genocide in Darfur! Fund earthquake relief in Haiti! Go Green! Yet they became discouraged when we asked them to investigate the complex interconnections of social problems, their multiple, inconclusive causes, the pitfalls of quick solutions. Where did such determined energy and, at the same time, such anxious conformity, such "intellectual timidity," as one of my colleagues put it, come from? And how should progressive educators respond to it?

As I embarked on my project to understand our work with this new generation, I reflected on my own development as an educator. Hired by the writing program in the early 1990s to work with U-M's increasingly multicultural population, I had quickly found ways to get students thinking about the values I cared most about: equality, inclusion, and peace with justice. My classroom style had been influenced by many progressive educators including Paulo Freire and Myles Horton¹—both of whom I had met in graduate school—as well as John Holt, whose gentle voice had critiqued the rigid teaching style common in U.S. schools in the 1960s,² and Jonathan Kozol, who had worked in the Boston ghetto at around the same time I had, and whose moral outrage in Death at an Early Age³ paralleled my own indignation at a racist school system that destroyed children's humanity through a lethal combination of arrogance, incompetence, prejudice, and fear. I came to college teaching rather late in life—I was almost fifty when I joined Michigan's faculty hoping to "make a difference" in my own way by teaching students at an elite university to question standard assumptions about race, culture, poverty, and the inevitability of war.

I started my research for this book by rereading Freire and contemporary commentators on his work. Invoking Tolstoy,⁴ Freire reminds us that man's highest vocation is to become more fully human, that is, to live to one's fullest potential by working in "dialogue, hope, humility and sympathy"⁵ for a world of greater equality between peoples, a more just order among nations, "a world in which it will be easier to love."⁶ This, indeed, is a goal that progressive educators and their students have always shared. But students' longing for a better world must

be shaped and nurtured, informed and interrogated by facts, analysis, reflection, experience, and opportunities for leadership.

How, then, should progressive educators address this particular generation's desire to serve humanity? What do these students, especially the relatively privileged students at elite universities, need to know? How can more of them be drawn into significant social justice work? What skills and whose knowledge should the college experience provide? How can we nourish the mental and spiritual stamina these young people will need as they confront injustice? What unique strengths do they bring that educators can build on? What weaknesses should we address? In what ways should the university's overall mission change to help the Millennial generation make effective contributions to the social good?

Those were some of the questions that came to mind as I read and reflected on the characteristics of this generation and the history of progressive education. Soon I realized I needed to talk to other faculty who teach U-M's social justice courses, counsel Millennial students, and direct programs that reach these students through experiential learning, reflection, dialogue, and service. I also needed to hear from students themselves, both current undergraduates whom I knew to be social justice leaders and recent graduates who are taking their Michigan education into the world. In the end, I recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thirty-two, one- to two-hour interviews—or, in most cases, "collaborative conversations"—with twelve progressive U-M faculty and staff, seven program heads (who are also faculty or staff), eight student leaders, four recent U-M graduates working in social justice fields, and a community storyteller, who, as an intellectual and an elder "telling history" in impoverished local schools, offers insight into what educators should be doing at the college level. I made no attempt to choose my conversation partners randomly; I knew them all through various collegial relationships. They had been students in my classes, or my advisees, or respected colleagues, or simply people I knew to be doing good work. For chapter 7, "Teaching Peace," I drew on my previous research on college students' attitudes toward war and peace, where my undergraduate research assistants and I had talked to eighty U-M undergraduates, about a quarter of whom had taken my class on nonviolence. All these stimulating interviews were extremely helpful to my thinking. They built on and challenged my ideas and those of the authors I was reading; they added new questions and some wonderful stories and often led the conversation in unexpected directions. I highlight my informants' voices throughout this book in order to reproduce as accurately as possible their thoughts and convictions, their contemplative moments, their uncertainties, frustrations, passion, and insights.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to the students and colleagues who engaged me in these long, intense conversations, read my drafts, and trusted me to tell their stories. Many thanks also to my daughter Cybelle Fox and my step-daughter, Sara Koopman, who supported and challenged my thinking in most productive ways, and to my husband Jim Koopman, whose generous spirit offers me the space and time to do this work.

This book is dedicated to my grandchildren, Sarah, Devyn, Kendall, and Aidan, who, at twelve, seven, four, and four months, will soon inherit a world shaped by the dreams and foibles of today's college students—the Millennial generation.

Notes

- 1. Especially Horton's autobiography, The Long Haul (1999).
- 2. Holt, 1994.
- 3. Kozol, 1967.
- 4. Tolstoy, 1914. "The highest vocation in the world is that of those who live in order to serve God by bringing good into the world and who have joined together for that very purpose" p. 51.
- 5. Freire, 1986, 21.
- 6. Ibid., 24.