

The Currents of Democracy: The Role of Small Liberal Arts Colleges

AS THE ONLY REMAINING SUPERPOWER the United States has the opportunity and burden of demonstrating the advantages of a free democratic society. It is my belief that small liberal arts colleges will play an important role in the coming global debate about the success or failures of American-style democracy. Having an honest conversation about democracy in the United States is difficult because of our country's painful history; Americans are uneasy talking about it outside of our particular comfort zones—ethnic groups, racial groups, religious groups. Our country has limited, by law in most instances and by custom when laws were challenged or seemed too blatantly discriminatory, the participation of some of its citizens in the democratic process. The most obvious examples are those presented by the enslavement of blacks, the subsequent Reign of Terror, Jim Crow laws, and the continuing struggle of blacks for equality. But there are many groups that have struggled to be equal members of our society whose stories may be less obvious, though no less painful: Native Americans, Latinos, Irish and Italian immigrants, women, gays and lesbians, and on and on.

The goal of full democratic participation in our society, while still a long way from being met, is much further along than it was when I started college some twenty-nine years ago. And it is my belief that the process of democracy in our country, a process that often entails streams and currents of different

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groups coming into intimate and sustained contact with one another, can be well served by the small liberal arts college.

My belief is not based on research or an exhaustive study of the literature; it is simple, uncomplicated, and formed from personal experience. Twenty-nine years ago, at the age of eighteen, I graduated from my all-black high school and left for Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. It was 1970, and the country was deeply concerned about the nature and future of democracy. Indeed, even my decision to go to Bowdoin was largely influenced by the questionable inequalities in treatment of the citizens of our country. The times were tumultuous: President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X had been assassinated. The black ghettos of the country had burned summer after summer. And one of the most divisive issues of these times, the war in Vietnam, was being debated with vitriolic voices all over the land.

It was this last issue, the war, that led me to Bowdoin and changed my life forever. I was against the war. Even now that statement sends shivers down my spine, because in 1970 being against the war was tantamount to being against America. There were many blacks who were against the war and against America. The hate-filled rhetoric of a then-angry Malcolm X, the Black Panther party's declaration of armed struggle, H. Rap Brown's pronouncement "Burn, baby, burn!"—these filled the airwaves of my adolescence. During my teens I was not against America, but I was ambivalent about my feelings towards my country. The television screens were constantly filled with images of how much we, blacks, were hated. Pictures of fire hoses knocking over demonstrators, dogs biting and ripping our blackness, churches burning, and the remains of children smoldering, along with the resulting charred hopes of a people, were what made up the six o'clock news. It is hard to love a country that makes it clear that it does not love you. Like most minorities, I wanted to be accepted at least, if not loved. And all of this was going on in the midst of a war.

I became eligible for the draft in 1969, and the lack of fairness in the laws of the land was manifested in who was drafted to fight in Vietnam. If you went to college, you could get a deferment and avoid the draft entirely. Going to college

was still a dream for many Americans, both black and white. But for blacks the centuries of racism and prejudice were just beginning to abate; many colleges had started to accept blacks, though often only a few were admitted each year. So if you were black in 1970 and not in college, and most were not, then you knew you were going to war. I considered myself one of the lucky ones because I had a full scholarship to the State University of New York at Stonybrook, which meant I was not going to war. I knew it was unfair that my friends who were not going to college would almost surely be drafted. While I studied and partied, they would be in Vietnam, but like most teenagers I did not lose any sleep over it. I thought that was just the way things were.

You can imagine my surprise in July of that year when I decided to check in with Stonybrook, having not heard anything from them, and was told: "We have no record of your being accepted at this institution. You will not be attending classes this fall." I was dumbfounded. How could that be? I had won a scholarship from the Fraternal Order of Masons and completed all the paperwork. In April I was told by phone that everything was fine. How could they claim to have never heard of me?

I sat on my bed at home, holding my head in my hands, saying over and over again: "I'm going to be drafted and sent to the war. I can't believe it." Suddenly I remembered that I had been accepted to another college—Bowdoin. I had never heard of the school and had no interest in going there, but at the insistence of a school secretary, who had been unrelenting, I had applied. I had thrown the acceptance letter in the bottom drawer of my dresser, a junk drawer into which I tossed every piece of paper that I knew I would never need but thought I had better keep just in case. I now found myself head down in that drawer flinging papers left and right as I tried to find the acceptance letter from Bowdoin.

My relief at finding the letter was short-lived as I read that the date to respond to their acceptance had long passed. I had no choice but to try to talk myself into that fall's freshman class. I called the admissions office and politely informed them that I was calling to find out about my room assignment. I was

told that the school had never received a reply to their invitation to attend the school. What followed next was an outright lie, as I accused the school of misplacing my paperwork (which did not work), and then an impassioned plea for mercy since I did not want to end up in the jungles of Vietnam. This at least brought me a “Hold on a minute while I talk to the Admissions Director.” I knew my life hung in the balance of the decision that would be made in the next few minutes.

What I did not know was that the spring semester of 1970 had been a troublesome one at Bowdoin, as it had at college campuses all over the nation. Students were striking, demonstrating, taking over college buildings, protesting any number of things: the war, school policies, or, at Bowdoin, admission rates for minorities. Even the relatively rural and isolated Bowdoin could not escape the clamor for rights: civil rights, political rights, the rights of women, and the right to have colleges reflect the demographic diversity of our nation.

The woman at the admissions office got back on the line after a few minutes and said, “Although we did not receive your acceptance letter, I’m sure that if you said you mailed it, you did. We are pleased to admit you to Bowdoin. Freshman orientation begins the first week of September. Congratulations.”

I hung up the phone thinking “Boy, am I slick. I sure fooled those people.” I never realized that the forces that were pushing and pulling on Bowdoin, just like the forces that were shaping and reshaping our nation, were really responsible for my triumph. At the time, there was a national movement to pressure institutions that had intentionally or unintentionally denied citizens the rights granted them by our democratic way of life to redress those wrongs. The shock troops of this movement—students, professors, religious leaders, and common citizens—were fighting for an America that reflected the principles in which they believed. Some folks in Brunswick, Maine, believed that more poor, minority, inner-city students should attend Bowdoin. Students and professors yelled and demonstrated and had allies in the admissions office who shared their belief, and the school began to seriously recruit minority students. In 1970, however, after sincerely trying to recruit significant numbers of blacks to Bowdoin, they had fallen short of their goal. The

admissions office knew there would be more demonstrations, more speeches, more denunciations of a biased, prejudiced, racist recruitment policy—a blemish and maybe even a black eye for this liberal institution. Bowdoin had prided itself on having the third African American to graduate from a United States college, John B. Russworm in 1826, and yet it was being accused of being just as guilty of not doing its part as Ole Miss.

This was the context of the times when I called the admissions office in July 1970. The truth was that I fooled no one with my story of replying to Bowdoin's acceptance letter. I was exactly who the school had been working so hard to recruit. I was black and, just as important, poor and from a poor community. It took less than five minutes to make the decision; I was in, though I would later come to understand that I had no idea what I was in for. I thought I was ready for Bowdoin, but I was wrong.

To understand the culture shock I felt in coming to Bowdoin one has to understand how segregated the two communities were then (and appreciate that they are even more segregated now). I grew up in the South Bronx in New York City. My family consisted of my mother and my three brothers. Our father had deserted us when we were infants; my mother worked when she could and received welfare when she could not find work or child care. As the neighborhoods we could afford to live in became more dangerous because of the heroin epidemic in the late 1950s and early 1960s, families that could afford to move away did. The civil-rights struggle provided more opportunities for middle-class blacks to move to "better" neighborhoods. Those of us who could not leave found that our neighborhoods were increasingly made up of other poor families. The first sign that things were changing was when the few whites that lived in the neighborhood moved away, followed by the blacks who had decent jobs. Those of us who remained were left with little contact with whites and black middle-class families outside of businesses and schools. We were growing up poor, segregated from other races, ethnic groups, and economic classes. This was the way I spent my entire elementary-, middle-, and high-school years.

The fact that Bowdoin's student body was 90 percent white and largely middle and upper middle class was a shock for me from the minute I first set foot on the campus. But it was not the only shock. One of the reasons I had wanted to go to Stonybrook was that it was considered a really good party school. At eighteen I felt that going to great parties would be an important part of my college experience. As I stood in the admissions office at Bowdoin, I saw only young men coming and going. As I looked out the window at the beautiful campus, I saw only young men strolling along, playing frisbee, sitting under trees talking.

"Excuse me, is this college divided into a boys campus and a girls campus?" I inquired. The young woman who was helping me find my dorm room smiled and looked up at me so she would not miss the look on my face as she said, "Bowdoin is an all-boys college." I looked at her as her words slowly registered. Years of tough training on the mean streets of New York City had taught me how to mask my feelings, and I called on all that experience and asked, "All boys?" She nodded her head yes even before I got the question out. I saw a look of sympathy in her eyes as I realized that the shock of what she said must have registered on my face.

I tried to pull myself together. That someone could think it was a good idea at eighteen years old to go to a single-sex school did not make any sense to me. What was the sense of getting away from your parents and living on your own if there were no girls around? I mean, sure, I wanted an education, but if you ranked sex, a good education, and playing your stereo loud, a good education would come in second (and after six o'clock in the evening, third) every time. I began to panic and looked out the window again. All the boys seemed quite content. Why, I wondered? They obviously knew that this school was all boys, so why had they come? Maybe they knew something I did not, like where the great parties were in the city of Brunswick. Of course. That had to be it.

"Excuse me again. But could you tell me where the blacks live in Brunswick?" I asked the young woman who had continued to watch me out of the corner of her eye. Wherever the blacks lived would be the first place I would head once I dropped my

bags off at my dorm room. No matter what kind of tough inner-city Brunswick had, I would feel quite comfortable there. It could not be any worse than the South Bronx. I would hang out, make a few friends, maybe even meet a girl.

“Well, I don’t quite know how to tell you this,” the young woman began. My heart began to sink. “But Brunswick is a very small city, and I’m afraid it’s nothing like New York. I think there is a black family that lives here, but I really don’t know.” She decided that she would give me the whole dose of medicine quickly to spare me a slow torture. “With your entering class we have a total of about sixty-seven blacks on campus. This is the most concentrated group of blacks in the state of Maine.” I stumbled over to a chair, forgetting the young woman was still watching me. I thought to myself, no girls, no blacks, what black teenager would voluntarily come to a place like this? Right then and there I knew this was not my kind of place.

But Bowdoin was my kind of place. I spent four years there and would not trade those four years for any other college experience in the world. There are many reasons I grew so fond of the college, not the least of which was its academic excellence. I came to Bowdoin thinking I was a good student. I had always excelled in my classes in high school. The harsh reality of how far behind I really was hit me during the first week of classes. I did not know if I would make it through the first semester. It all seemed like too much. Bowdoin had a pass/fail system where a pass was really considered a C by the students who cared about grades (which was almost the entire student body, no matter how much they claimed otherwise), an H or honors was considered a B, and an HH or high honors, an A.

I spent my first year at Bowdoin just trying to keep my head above water. I was not alone. There were many students, black and white, who found the academic rigors of Bowdoin a real challenge. The thing that saved me was the same thing that saved most of the students who found themselves in my predicament—other students and the faculty. There is something about the smallness of Bowdoin that brought about an intimacy that I will never forget. People cared about one another. Students would go out of their way to help you if you needed it. A

student who left school because of poor academic performance, although a rare occurrence, was felt to be a real loss by the student body because we all knew one another. The longer we were at the school, the more we felt responsible for those who followed us.

The faculty seemed to feel the same way. Our classes were small, so you could not help but develop a relationship with the faculty. And what a faculty they were. We were in awe of them. They cared passionately about the subject matter they taught. They were fiercely independent, often at odds with the administration and, just as likely, with the student body. Even acknowledging the tendency to romanticize one's youth, I still feel that this was a time of great change in our nation. The debate was never more intense, never more encompassing, and schools like Bowdoin were right in the middle of it. The issues were racism, sexism, multinational corporations, socialism, communism, sex, drugs, the war; the debates were passionate. We were concerned with "selling out" and whether places like Bowdoin were part of the solution or part of the problem. These debates raged in our classes, in our dorms, in our lives.

I majored in two areas, psychology and sociology. Bowdoin did not have a major in education, but I took all of the education classes that were offered. I was convinced that I could begin to find the answers I sought in these three disciplines as I prepared to go back to poor communities and try to help even the playing field for children. I knew that the problems poor families faced were complex and intricately interwoven with larger societal issues, such as poverty, failing schools, and the breakdown of community. By the time my senior year rolled around, the pieces of the puzzle had started to fall into place. I began to have an inkling of what the issues were and what some of the solutions might be. I took courses in physiology and pharmacology that year as I tried to understand why drug abuse was such a problem in poor communities. I began to feel that I was getting close, but time was running out. My years at Bowdoin were coming to an end.

I will always think fondly of my senior year at Bowdoin. It was then that I discovered one of the secrets of a small college: you can talk to the professors. The more I learned, the more I

wanted to know, and yet so much of what I wanted to know could not be taught in the classroom. I had questions that had no definitive answers, only strong theoretical possibilities. I spent countless hours talking to professors about what might be possible. We talked over dinner, over lunch, and while walking in the magnificent Maine countryside. I learned as much from these conversations as I did from all of my course work.

It is the bringing together of the rich diversity of our nation in an intimate setting that makes colleges like Bowdoin so necessary to the continued struggle for full democracy in our country. My years at Bowdoin were spent during times that signaled the end of the civil-rights era in America. Many of us thought that by the time we reached middle age our country would be further along in the areas that we debated with so much youthful enthusiasm. To be honest, the country has moved steadily in the right direction. We may not have moved as quickly as many would have hoped, but we have moved forward.

I came to Bowdoin wanting to do several things: having a great social life was one, learning how to help poor children was another. The reason I stayed at Bowdoin for four years had nothing to do with my social life, although I must admit it improved dramatically when women were admitted to the school my sophomore year. It had to do with the training and preparation I received. I knew that the only way to help poor children in this country was to improve their educational opportunities, and my dream was to learn everything I could to create a world where this could happen. Bowdoin offered me support for that dream. No one laughed at my dream and no one said it was not possible. Rather, people said, "If that is what you want, this is what you need. It will be hard, but I'll help." It was said by students, by faculty, and, seemingly, by the college itself.

The college was serious about its mission of educating the future of America. I like to think I did not waste the college's time. I took advantage of the opportunities to learn from people of different races, economic classes, and regions of the country and the world. When I graduated from Bowdoin, I was a different person than when I entered. I knew my vocation would be to work in the poorest communities this country had

to offer—it was my calling when I came, it was my calling when I left. But being at Bowdoin was like being plunged into a brave new world. The people had changed me. I had grown in breadth as well as depth, which can only happen if we intentionally encourage diversity in our nation and on our college campuses. Small liberal arts colleges force the members of their communities to live with and therefore know other kinds of people; for those who come having had limited experience with this, it is an opportunity to grow and learn. I left Bowdoin better prepared to tackle the job I wanted to do. By my senior year I had mastered how to learn. I went from being a mediocre student to one who received straight High Honors my senior year. My success was less a testament to my brilliance than a tribute to the hard work of professors and students who believed in me, challenged me, molded me, and finally sent me out into the world to do what I had to do.

Changing the conditions for the poor children of this nation is a tall order and much too ambitious for any one individual, so I have focused my work on a small piece of this nation: the children of Harlem. Twenty-four years after leaving Bowdoin I am where I want to be, doing what I always wanted to do. The not-for-profit agency of which I am president works with over four thousand poor children from Harlem. In each one of our children I see myself. I know what it feels like to be poor and a minority, and to think that you are all alone. My challenge each day is to demonstrate to my children the trust, faith, and belief that the faculty and students had in me many years ago when I was at Bowdoin.

The Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families provides a range of educational, social service, cultural, and recreational supports for our children. Each new American crisis—AIDS, violence, crack cocaine, fatherlessness—hits our children the hardest and adds another burden to families that have no financial, educational, or emotional reserves. Two years ago we decided to try a bold new experiment. Instead of working with individual families in need, we would work with an entire community. The challenge would be to rebuild the fabric of a community while strengthening essential community institutions. We created a new program called the Harlem Children's

Zone (HCZ). The HCZ is a geographically targeted, comprehensive, community-building initiative that focuses on a twenty-four-block area of central Harlem. The concept is to support every child and family in the Zone (currently there are approximately twelve thousand residents in the Zone). We are also working with the three elementary schools to increase academic achievement, with the churches to do more for children, and with other community-based organizations. We have organizers forming block associations, and we will be opening a counseling center and an employment center. With residents, we are planning how to increase the availability and use of technology, increase resident leadership, and improve the housing.

The Harlem Children's Zone is a large and complex initiative, and Rheedlen could not do it alone; in my small corner of the world, I am not alone. On these same streets of Harlem where I have seen so many of my children struggle to make it—where making it sometimes means you go to college and sometimes means you stay alive—others have come. They are from Bowdoin, and their lives are very different than the one I have chosen to live. They come to see me, to walk these streets with me, to share for a moment the danger, the hope, the promise that the children of Harlem represent. They come to help.

When we look at our country today, it is more segregated than ever, not just by race, but by class. The difference between the rich and the poor has increased. Most people do not have friends outside of their own racial or economic class. I find it significant that many of my closest friends are people who went to Bowdoin, and they are rich and poor, black and white. They come to help me because we all went through something together that made us aware of the real promise of America: a democracy that works, equal opportunity for all, a system of government where your station in life is based not on your color, race, religion, or sex, but on your achievement. And we still believe in those things.

So my friends from Bowdoin come to Harlem to whisper encouragement in my ear, to bring their resources both professional and personal, but more importantly to hug a friend, to see his vision of our nation and to accept it as their own. If my

children from Harlem can make it, so can America, so can our democracy. When you see that vision you recognize how awesome it is, how awesome the promise of America is, and why liberal arts colleges like Bowdoin, where that vision was nurtured and continues to be supported, are critical to making that vision a reality for all the country and indeed the world.