

## Is Well-Being an Individual Matter?

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THERE ARE A VARIETY OF WAYS to approach the human community and how we understand our place in it. For purposes of clarity, I want to suggest that Rene Descartes offered one way: “I think, therefore I am.” There are clear implications for this view, in particular, how the individual relates to the community. It suggests a level of autonomy and disconnectedness that I want to argue is a fiction and problematizes the project of collective responsibility and well-being. In fact, it seems to me this is the dominant paradigm that we have applied in higher education. Our talk of collective well-being, high impact practices, civic learning, group work, and community service is in many ways undermined by the emphasis on the individual as the unit of analysis in our work with students.

There is another way to think about the human community and experience. Here I draw from Ubuntu philosophy in which the argument is rephrased as: “I am a person through other persons”<sup>1</sup> or to contrast Descartes, “I belong, therefore I am.” The implication is that community is the formative social structure of the individual and, therefore, that the well-being of the community is fundamentally connected to the well-being of the individual. In this model, it would not be possible for individuals to flourish if the community was decaying. I want to suggest that we need to rethink how we have been approaching this whole question of well-being and the project of higher education.

So when we talk about well-being, what do we mean? In *The Well-being Manifesto for a Flourishing Society*, Nic Marks and Hetan Shaw suggest the following: “One of the key aims of a democratic government is to promote the good life: a flourishing society, where citizens are happy, healthy, capable and engaged . . . Well-being is more than just happiness. As well as feeling satisfied and happy, well-being means developing as a person, being fulfilled, and making a contribution to the community.”<sup>2</sup>

The invitation is to think about all aspects of our work with students with this frame in mind. Does our method of evaluating students for admission value students as parts of communities (cohorts) or does it value them as SAT scores, essays, and padded resumes? How does the whole education experience—or the course unit, the credit hour, the transcript, even the diploma—reflect community? The Posse Foundation, one of the most prominent college preparation and youth leadership development initiatives in the country, promotes taking an approach to student cohorts as collectives whose fate in the educational enterprise is tied to the well-being of others.<sup>3</sup> Is there something to be learned from this perspective? If we took that stance seriously, would our methods of assessment, graduation ceremonies, and units of support services change? Might we even be challenged to reconsider how faculty are rewarded and recognized?

Why might understanding well-being as a collective rather than as an individual experience be a compelling case to make? Because we understand that our fate as individuals is tied to each other as parts of community. We understand that the work of elected officials is often hampered because they have paid attention to their own narrow self-interests or those of their parochial districts. There is an emerging consensus that the current arrangements of power do not serve the full purposes of a democratic ideal. The ongoing challenge of civic leadership, like that of learning and of fully becoming, is to explore, to recognize, and to respect while taking account of more than narrow interests. Our educational work, while informative, is also formative.

We know that in real life, individuals rarely work by themselves on matters of social change or on issues that affect large populations. I agree with Albert Bandura when he says, "Many of the challenges of life center on common problems that require people to work together with a collective voice to change their lives for the better."<sup>4</sup> So if part of educating the next generation of leaders is about solving common problems, then it seems that we must craft learning environments in which those skills are taught, and we must also create reward structures in which what we believe is important is valued.

In the end, there are many reminders about how we are connected to each other as human beings—that being human is more than what Descartes suggested. We are reminded by the labor movement's slogan that "an injury to one [is] an injury to all"<sup>5</sup> and by Martin Luther King Jr.'s insistence in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."<sup>6</sup> These are more than platitudes. I think we are challenged to consider the well-being of students in the communal contexts in which they live and study. From time to time, we are reminded in our national life that what affects others affects us also. The recent epidemic of Ebola caused national leaders of both parties to agree that this was an area in which action had to be taken. It would be a stretch to simply argue that this was because the well-being of Africans was affected. Rather, it was the realization that we are somehow connected in this globalized world. It is this spirit of collective life and responsibility that I am arguing is central to well-being, and also that we ignore it at our own peril. Justice Stephen Breyer makes the following claim that I believe is consistent with the case that I have been trying to advance here:

*We were challenged by our students to explore deeply why we were looking at history and not engaging with the unfolding events of our time. Those deep conversations of conscience, of safety, and of privilege forced us to re-chart our course and include St. Louis, MO in our itinerary*

*The future of the American constitutional idea, then, is the future of a shared set of ideals. This implies a shared commitment to practices necessary to make any democracy work: conversation, participation, flexibility, and compromise. Such a commitment cannot guarantee success in overcoming serious problems: terrorism, environmental degradation, population growth, energy security, and the like. But it does imply a certain attitude toward finding solutions—a willingness to explore options, to search for consensus, and not to be "too sure" of oneself, a habit of mind that Judge Learned Hand once defined as the very "spirit of liberty."*<sup>7</sup>

Let me conclude by acknowledging the debt I owe a friend and colleague, a professor of political science at Allegheny College, a member of my community with whom I have had the privilege of sharing some of these ideas. I have learned from him as my thinking has expanded. We were fortunate to teach a course in the summer of 2014 on voting rights as part of a two-year theme at Allegheny. The course included a travel component, and we went to all the key civil rights locations in the South. At the same time, events were unfolding in Ferguson, MO, which appeared to us to be the current site of the struggle for justice and human dignity that we were studying. We were challenged by our students to explore deeply why we were looking at history and not engaging with the unfolding events of our time. Those deep conversations of conscience, of safety, and of privilege forced us to re-chart our course and include St. Louis, MO in our itinerary as a way of recognizing that an injury to one is an injury to all and that whatever affects one, affects all. Our well-being in Meadville, PA could not make sense in the face of the death of Michael Brown. We could no longer be implicated by silence and individual safety.

We understood in that moment, at the insistence of our students, that well-being meant making a contribution to the community. So we were there in St. Louis at the National Day of Action in October, 2014 to bear witness to the possibility that we could stand in solidarity with others because we belonged to the same community.

#### NOTES

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3. The Posse Foundation, Inc., "26 Years of Scholar Success," accessed November 30, 2015, [www.possefoundation.org](http://www.possefoundation.org).
4. Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (New York: Worth, 1997), 491.
5. Industrial Workers of the World, "Preamble, Constitution, & General Bylaws of the Industrial Workers of the World," amended through January 1, 2015, <http://www.iww.org/PDF/Constitutions/CurrentIWWConstitution.pdf>.
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7. Stephen Bryer, "Wise Constraints," *Atlantic Monthly* (November 2007), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/11/wise-constraints/306310/>.