

The Universal Civics Course

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Fool me once, shame on you;

fool me twice, shame on me.

This business of trusting or distrusting Tops is truly a phony issue. It's as if the issue is about their trustworthiness. But the issue of system membership is not about "Them," it is about "Us." How trustworthy are we as members and citizens? Are we, even as lowly members, willing to accept our roles as co-creators of our systems? When we say "I trust and support the Tops," isn't that an easy way to step away from our responsibility for this system? Isn't that simply a prelude to my blaming "Them" when the system fails?

When the leaders' grand visions turn to ashes—as they so often do—we kick the bums out, impeach them, send them into exile, hang them, or shoot them. And then we wait. We wait for the next leader whom we can again hold responsible for our lives and our systems. And on and on it goes.

There are two parallel myths about leaders: The first is that all progress comes from the actions of enlightened leaders; the second is that all the horrors of humanity—warfare, oppression, genocide—are attributable to demonic leadership.

These myths are comforting to us as system members in that they absolve us of responsibility for both progress and disaster.

However, they do not reflect historical truth. The eight-hour workday was not arrived at because factory owners thought it would be a nice thing to do. The advance of women was not the result of men deciding it was high time to give the ladies a fair shake. Nor did the end of slavery happen because slaveholders and the Government decided that freedom was a legitimate right of all people. In all cases, progress occurred not out of the benevolence and wisdom of leaders, but out of the messy, impudent, and relentless pushback—through strikes, demonstrations, resistance, and civil disobedience—of system members.

And it also is true that oppression, warfare, and holocausts have existed only through the acquiescence of the members.

Which brings us to the Universal Civics Course.

civics *n*: the study of government dealing with
the rights and duties of citizens

The rights and duties of citizens: Now there's an interesting idea!

I propose that we develop a Universal Civics Course. Its purpose will be to enlighten all of us regarding our rights and duties as members/citizens.

In the course we will explore the role not only of the leaders but also of the members in humankind's history of warfare, oppression, and genocide: How the members trusted too much. How they abandoned their own responsibility. How they were too lazy to work at citizenship. How they went for the bait when their leaders told them how special and noble and deserving they were in contrast to the others, in contrast to "Them." How they found easy targets for their frustrations. How they insisted on reserving the good life for themselves while others were surrounded by evil and injustice. How they fought with one another instead of pushing back at the leaders.

We will study case after case—from the past and the present—of this pattern of member complicity in evil. And then the first phase of the course will end.

The Final Examination

Some years later, the Leader will call our Graduates out to war. "Our cause is noble," the Leader will say. "We want nothing for ourselves, only justice for others. "The enemy is the Devil, set on our destruction," the Leader will say. "Our people are great. We have not started this war, nor do we want it. But our personal wishes must be set aside in the face of this great threat. To war, boys and girls, to war! Our cause is just!"

Our graduates will listen to the Leader. They will study the facts. They will dig deep—behind the propaganda. They will observe the Leader closely: They will see all the tricks the Leader uses to arouse their emotions and dampen their minds. (“Notice that chill that runs up and down your spine. Isn’t it great how the Leader does that?”) They have seen all of this before. They will study, observe, discuss, and when the Leader speaks, they will listen hard.

Then they will look at one another; smiles will break out across their faces; there will be giggles, then laughter, then wave after wave of bent-over-double, helpless, uncontrollable laughter.

And then the difficult business of co-creation will begin, which is the final examination for the Universal Civics Course.

Who Wants the Universal Civics Course?

Does anyone in power want the Universal Civics Course? Think about it. You’re the owner of your business or the Top Executive of your company or the parent in the family or the teacher in the classroom or the Leader of the nation. Do you want your members to be co-creators? How can I even begin to create the Universal Civics Course if my students insist on being co-creators? Wouldn’t we much prefer that our members trust us to do the right thing?

It is naive to expect leaders to encourage the development of the Universal Civics Course. Maybe that's the way it should be. The rights and duties of citizens are the members' business.

Barry Oshry

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