

JUSTICE TALKS: Reflections on Civic Engagement
Rhode Island Council for the Humanities
Partnering with the Rhode Island Service Alliance and the Feinstein Institute for Public
Service at Providence College
Providence, RI
January-March 2007

Introduction

Our Humanities Council decided to expand the scope of the Meaning of Service project as developed so well by the Illinois Council. Because our state is small, and therefore accessible from all areas, we offered the experience to all AmeriCorps members. In partnership with the Rhode Island Service Alliance (the managing organization for AmeriCorps) and with the generous offer of free space from the Feinstein Institute for Public Service at Providence College, we held 6 sessions from January-March of this year.

We chose readings loosely grouped by theme (we had two facilitator meetings prior to the start of the actual discussion groups); involved our Lieutenant Governor, Elizabeth Roberts, as official spokesperson for the series; and had good media coverage and very positive responses from all participants. You will note from the responses of AmeriCorps members that the experience was very valuable and added a dimension of positive community building not present previously.

Participants

All AmeriCorps members in Rhode Island – 200 people from across the state. The largely female group reflected a diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds and participants ranged in age from 19 to 39 years of age.

Sessions and Readings

<u>Session</u>	<u>Themes</u>	<u>Readings</u>
January 19	Hidden Gifts	Toni Cade Bambara – <i>The Lesson</i> Pablo Neruda – <i>The Lamb and the Pinecone</i>
January 26	Outsiders	Franz Kafka – <i>Fellowship</i> Henri Barbusse – <i>The Eleventh</i>
February 2	Belonging	Langston Hughes – <i>Theme for English B</i> Imtiaz Dharker – <i>They'll Say "She Must Be From Another Country"</i>
March 2 (Citizenship/Civic Engagement Institute)	How Do We Serve?	Adam Davis – <i>What We Don't Talk About When We Don't Talk About Service</i> Bertolt Brecht – <i>A Bed for the Night</i>

March 16	Playing by the Rules	Moses Maimonedes – <i>Mishneh Torah</i> Ralph Waldo Emerson – Selection from “ <i>Self-Reliance</i> ”
	Disconnections	Gwendolyn Brooks – <i>The Lovers of the Poor</i> Margaret Sutherland – <i>Dry Dock</i>

Special Features of this Conversation

Each group was kept to the 10-12 member level except for the very popular Spanish language group that had 20+ participants. For the Spanish group, texts were translated and distributed prior to each session (a challenge) but facilitator Dילania Inoa did a great job engaging these volunteers, who would not have had access to the program otherwise. On opening day Dילania read the Neruda story in its original Spanish – everyone truly enjoyed that.

Feedback from Participants, Planners, or Facilitators

Many comments were received based on several questions asked at the close of the discussion series. The following is just a small sample.

Your thinking about service or ways of doing service?

- *It helps to see why people do service, there are various reasons and degrees of commitment and different ways of going about the civic engagement experience.*
- *I always find it useful to be reminded of how it feels to be on the receiving end of service. Many of my group-mates (myself included) began our lives on the receiving end of service, so being able to talk about it and remember it was great. I find it has a huge affect on the ways in which I think about what I'm doing. It sort of knocks me off my pedestal of “awesome person doing good things” to a reasonable level of “human helping human”.*
- *For me, thinking about service is something vital because we all need from one another to become better citizens.*
- *I am more devoted than ever before.*
- *Made me think about how sometimes I need to sit back and observe rather than act on something I'm unsure about.*
- *I now take stock in the small victories on a day to day basis.*
- *The whole program touched on some potential controversies or sensitive issues, such as race and socioeconomic status, that impact ways of performing service projects and that we don't normally talk about freely.*

Your relationship to your AmeriCorps colleagues?

- *I feel like we are now much more of a force because we have come together and truly gotten to know one another and talk about the issues we all deal with on some level.*
- *It was nice to form friendships with other programs, to hear how similar our struggles were. We could help each other out a lot.*

- *To be patient when we think we know all of a situation - people see things from different angles.*
- *Better now than before we started these discussions.*

Your relationships to those you serve?

- *That you need to get to know the people you serve, talk with them because ultimately nothing can be done if we don't know those we're serving.*
- *I've begun to even out the level of service I offer to all guests. It's easy to get in the groove of helping the "under served" and ignore the privileged kids because you assume they have someone else somewhere taking care of them. Kids are kids, and in an environment like the Museum, they all need attention and care and love.*
- *Be mindful that it's hard to ask for help.*
- *Many have the same upbringing as I do. However the direction in life I chose was for the better, where some of them are unaware of choices and make bad decisions.*
- *I think it's important to understand the difference between charity and service. Effective service is often dependent on the relationships you build.*

Your plans for the future?

- *That service is an integral part of who I am. Discussions such as the ones that I have had in Justice Talks have allowed me to really get to the core of what service means to me.*
- *Stay engaged.*
- *To succeed and help make social reform decisions to ensure the representation of the constant struggle families in need go through and the treatment they receive.*
- *No matter what, I will always give back, some people depend on service from other people.*
- *To someday become a good mentor to those who need a lot of good advice in life.*
- *It made me see the wide scope of service opportunities that exist out there in the world. It's reminded me of what abilities I have.*

What have been the biggest struggles or challenges of service for you so far? How if at all these discussions helped you in your struggles or challenges?

- *The big struggle I have had is gauging the difference I'm making as well as understanding that the service I do is needed. I think that whenever a discussion happens around something that becomes such a daily routine it allows for reflection, a chance to really think about what we are doing. I find that to be beneficial, to voice my frustrations and have them echoed to me by others going through the same thing.*
- *I got into this slump recently where I just didn't want to serve anymore. I was tired of being under paid and under appreciated and taking care of everyone else while no one was taking care of me. The discussions, and the readings, reminded me of a few things. First of all, the problems of pay and appreciation are not the faults of the people I serve, and they don't deserve to have me or anyone else bail out on them. I also realized how tough people are who live in situations like mine. I hate arguing with DHS over my food stamps. I cried all winter about my gas bill. Driving to work past Crossroads (a homeless shelter) every day, I*

saw how many people have been doing this for a lot longer than I have. It deepened my respect for the communities we serve.

- *The issues of poor people and the lack of compassion received. In reality, when you're down, society wants you to stay quiet.*
- *When I think that I am doing enough, I tend to find out that I should be doing a lot more than what I am already doing, it bugs me. I guess the readings helped me understand that I am doing good work anyhow.*
- *Trying to help those who don't want help. These readings made me realize they just may not want to feel like they need help even if they do.*

Feedback on Specific Texts [Link to intros in Resource Library]

Toni Cadi Bambara – The Lesson

- *My group had a great conversation about this piece, because we could all sort of see two sides to the story. On one hand, the teacher was showing the kids that there was more to the world than what they saw on their own block in their own neighborhood. On the other hand, that can be a traumatic experience. It suddenly instills a sense of value they have never known. Suddenly they aren't good enough or wealthy enough for something. It made me think about the lessons I'm teaching the kids I serve. Do I show them something they don't know much about? Is that a good or a bad experience? It allowed for more thought, I guess.*
- *I realized everything that you say or do with your students, even if they don't admit it, will affect them.*

Pablo Neruda – The Lamb and the Pinecone

- *This sparked really good conversation on exchange and relationships and how they affect people. I have so many different relationships in my life that it is interesting to examine and see what they bring to my life and hopefully what they bring to the other person's life.*
- *I liked this piece because it pointed out that sometimes the things we discard are gifts. The neighbor boy may have been giving a gift to the narrator, or he could have been tossing out something he was finished with. The emphasis lies on the receiver. You can make what you want out of everything that comes your way, gift or otherwise.*
- *This one made more sense of service/kindness coming around full circle.*
- *I enjoyed this story because it makes you realize how we're connected and sometimes it doesn't matter who when or what but just that it is.*
- *Left me with more questions than answers, which is sometimes a good thing. It allowed the discussion to take several different paths as we tried to determine the hidden meanings the author may have intended to bring to the story. I especially appreciated the opportunity to hear Dilaria read the passage in Spanish, as it was originally written. I heard several people commend that the story was much better and more moving in Spanish and had lost quite a bit in translation. I was reminded of the importance of language and had an urge to expand my language skills from solely English and French to include Spanish as well, since it is much more prevalent and common in our American society.*

Franz Kafka – Fellowship

- *Kafka’s story made me realize how inclusive we can be in our service (especially with team oriented programs like City Year RI). I am sure I’ve been guilty of alienating people in my service, so it was a bit of an eye-opener.*
- *How exclusion affects others whether its purposely done or done for other reasons.*
- *This was my favorite discussion – it seemed to bring everyone into the conversation, perhaps because everyone has “outsider” qualities in them. There is a place that everyone feels out of the proverbial loop.*

Henri Barbusse – The Eleventh

- *Barbusse’s story was really inspiring and endearing just in the absolute humanity of it.*
- *Resonates throughout time.*
- *It poses a lot of valuable questions to people in service.*
- *Made me realize that no matter what, you aren’t going to please/help everyone so be happy for who you do serve.*

Langston Hughes – Theme for English B

- *This stresses how divided the relationships are between different people, and there wasn’t much hope that there would be any unification. I like to think of myself as open-minded, but I kind of doubted that after reading this.*
- *We talked in my group a lot about what it’s like to come out of your environment into something totally new and trying to embrace that without losing who you are and where you come from.*

Imtiaz Dharker – They’ll Say “She Must Be From Another Country”

- *This was especially thought provoking because it challenged us to really examine our thought processes and about how we view “differences” and how easy that is to sum up in a neat little sentence.*
- *I have the privilege of identifying and recognizing two very different cultures including the American way of life which I have grown up in and the Indian culture where my parents and all my relatives have grown up in. It is hard many times to be torn between these two worlds as I have. However, as time goes on and I grow as a person, I start to see only the positive aspects on my life and the negative petty ones don’t seem so important any more.*
- *I see kids trying to belong, or being singled out because maybe they’re different or new at school. This was especially meaningful to my work with those I serve.*

Adam Davis – What We Don’t Talk About When We Don’t Talk About Service

- *This reading really forced me to categorize myself into the varying templates he presented, and in that regard made me realize some of the more personal and selfish reasons I serve.*
- *I think that the self-aspect of service is rarely ever addressed and something that is pushed to the side when in fact it may be the largest player in why people decide to go into service.*

- *This one was particularly difficult to talk about. When I tell other people that I am in City Year or doing an AmeriCorps Program, many times the immediate response is wow that is impressive. However, looking at this reading, you have to look at both perspectives of service and what it is all about. In my mind helping others and trying to give as much has always been the ultimate gift. However, reading another perspective makes me take a step back and really wonder if that is how everyone feels about service.*
- *This was tough because it felt like my motives for serving were being questioned. The five categories for motives to serve seemed alarming to me at first because it seemed like there were no good categories. Talking about it with the group cleared things up, as it usually did. Also, as usual, it got me thinking about why I serve and how that comes across, not only to the people I serve, but also to other people in general. My hope is that people will see my service, or someone else's service, and want to do the same.*
- *A lot of the issues we discussed are never really brought up with the frankness that this reading helped to bring out.*

Bertolt Brecht – A Bed for the Night

- *This reading felt sort of like a volleyball game. On one hand, Brecht seemed to be saying that the simple things can make a difference. Just giving someone a bed for one night, giving them one night out of the snow, can be powerful. At the same time, he seemed to be charging the reader that simple things are not enough to make a huge change. I felt charged to do simple things, but also to commit to working on a grander scale as well.*

Moses Maimonedes - Mishneh Torah

- *It made me realize the importance of serving because it's the good thing to do, as opposed to serving for a selfish reason.*
- *My group spent a lot of time talking about which kind of giver we were, as designated by Maimonedes. Our facilitator categorized all of us as the second level, which is quite flattering. This reading, like many others, underscored what I see as the importance of teaching people to fish, rather than giving them fish.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson – Self Reliance

- *Emerson's essay stressed that one should act and serve because it's morally good to the individual serving. My own sentiment echoes that concept, and I felt positive about why I was dedicating a year of my life to community service.*
- *This was fun to re-read because I remember loving Emerson in high school, but I hadn't revisited it since. Reading it again, I was ashamed of myself for liking this writer who talked about not serving if you don't want to. When I read it a few more times, I remembered why I loved him. He's talking about being true to who you are and serving from a genuine and honest place, not just doing it to do it. I've heard many people say that a year of service should be required for all young people and I don't think that's true. I think it's a great year and everyone should be appreciative of what they have and how they can help others. If you're not truly into it, though, I think it only breeds resentment and anger. I don't know that there is a real benefit to that.*

Gwendolyn Brooks – The Lovers of the Poor

- *Brooks' poem was funny to me because I've come into contact with people the likes of which she described, but, at the same time, it made me feel guilty that I could be exactly like one of those people.*
- *We are the poor! I am the poor!*
- *How some are content with not being concerned with the conditions of those they serve or help. Just signing a check makes them feel good.*
- *Made me realize the prejudices we have even when we might be trying to do something good.*

Margaret Sutherland – Dry Dock

- *Sutherland's story was particularly appealing to me because I related to her narrator. It made me come to terms with the fleeting nature of my service, and reinforced how completely separate the world is between the helper and the person in need of help. I felt it was a good capstone for the themes of the past few weeks.*
- *I loved this reading because it emphasized how important it is to learn from the people you teach. None of us is finished learning, and we'd be remiss to not notice that the people we serve usually serve us right back, if we pay attention to it.*

Have you shared these readings with anyone outside the discussion series?

- *I occasionally get on a soap box with my non-service friends, the ones who are still in college and not yet integrated into a larger community like the one you'd find in a city like Providence, and these readings gave me fuel for that. It helped me argue the point that those who have should share with those who don't have. Roberto Clemente, former Pittsburgh Pirate and Puerto Rican native, said "If you have the chance to make life better for someone else and you choose not to, you are wasting your time on Earth."*
- *Yes, my children, they don't understand why I take a low paying job to work so hard.*

What is the single most important contribution these conversations have made to your experience with AmeriCorps?

- *The chance to meet other AmeriCorps members and discuss important issues/themes with complete strangers who are committed to promoting the human good – but who are approaching this commitment in different ways. My discussion group was made up of a wide variety of AmeriCorps members who each come from extremely wide backgrounds, ethnic, racial, economic, education, etc. What was unique to this program was that it set aside time to explore important issues to our work that we are each deeply invested in – but otherwise would not have the opportunity or space to discuss them openly with such a diverse group. The readings acted as a nice framework for us to focus around – but in the end what made this unique and special was the time set aside for discussion. Our group facilitator made a HUGE and positive difference – she was just right!*
- *Some people really do want to help – wish there were more.*
- *How very, very important my service is to me.*

- *These discussions made me act and think differently about service, those serving and those being served.*

Facilitators

The challenge was to find facilitators who would volunteer their services (except for our two lead facilitators who were paid by the stipend provided by NEH), provide meals for the large group, and provide books for all participants. Ultimately we worked with 16 regular facilitators and 2 “floating” facilitators (who would substitute when the need arose) and all enjoyed the experience.

Al Basile – basile@albasile.com (401) 438-7431 Board member, RI Council for the Humanities, former high school English teacher, jazz musician

Rick Benjamin – ribenjam@gmail.com (401) 331-2298 x18 Co-Executive Director, RI Service Alliance, poet, mensch

Claudia DeCesare – claudia_decesare@brown.edu (401) 863-3676 Swearer Center for Community Service, Brown University

Kate Douton – kdouton@savebay.org (401) 439-7402; 272-3540, x124 Director of Conservation Corps, Save the Bay

Risa Gilpin – risa@rihumanities.org (401) 273-2250 Program Director, RI Council for the Humanities

Carrie Hackett – c_hackett05@yahoo.com 612-419-1595 former AmeriCorps member, now working at the RI Service Alliance

Dilania Inoa – dilania_inoa@brown.edu (401) 863-1024 Swearer Center for Community Service, Brown University, led the Spanish language group

Rob Jones – robtleejones@rcn.com 508-344-8166 Consultant, community activist

John Mahone – takethose@hotmail.com High school teacher, community activist

Mackay Miller – mackay.miller@ppsd.org cell – (401) 447-7829; office – (401) 278-2802 RI Board of Education

Keith Morton – kmorton@providence.edu (401) 865-1204 Professor, Providence College

Jonny Skye Njie – jskyenjie@gmail.com (401) 867-0257 Free-lance educator/artist; works with RI Board of Education

Adeola Oredola – adeola@youthinactionri.org (401) 751-4264 x2; cell – (401) 339-0673 Director, Youth in Action, Providence.

Mary Lee Partington – merrilymuse@earthlink.net (401) 258-9986 Board member, RI Council for the Humanities, Award winning high school English teacher

Colleen Rost-Banik – crostban@providence.edu (401) 865-1256 Feinstein Institute for Public Service, Providence College

Jim Tull - jimtull@verizon.net (401) 941-2874. Professor Providence College, Community activist