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Motivating Young People to Be Active Citizens

William Damon

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Conference on Educating Citizens for Life of Virtue and Purpose

It's wonderful to be here in this very beautiful spot. I love this building, among other things, but the whole campus just shines, especially on a day like today. It's very uplifting to be here. I wanted to thank you for that. Today I'm going to speak about a very particular part of civic education, which has to do with motivating young people to actually do something, to participate, to be active citizens.

There are obviously lots of things that we need to educate students for, and they certainly need to have knowledge and they need to have a sense of history and a lot of skills. But the motivation, I think, sometimes gets left off the table in our educational pursuits, maybe partly because we don't know a lot about how to do it or what's really involved. So that's what I want to talk about today: what inspires young people, what moves them to actually get involved as citizens.

At Stanford in my center, The Center on Adolescence, we have focused on the idea of purpose. We've looked at purpose and studied purpose in a number of ways for about 10 years now, and we believe that purpose in life is one of the great developmental achievements that helps people keep going. It helps them form their goals; it helps them with sticking with those goals, with being resilient during inevitable ups and downs in life; and it gives them a sense that they're engaged in something beyond the self, something larger than themselves—important on more than just a personal scale. So I want to begin by giving you the definition of purpose that we use and I think has now become increasingly an accepted definition in the development of the

sciences; it's an intention that is stable. It's not a temporary, one day thing like "Oh, tomorrow I'm hoping I'll find a parking place at BYU or get a good grade on the exam tomorrow" or something like that—it's a long term goal, and it's an attempt to accomplish something that is meaningful to you as an individual. In other words, nobody can tell you that your purpose is to do this or do that and you say, "Okay, I guess I gotta do it." You have to own it and care about it. But that's not all. It has to be a consequence to something beyond the self.

There are lots of meaningful things in life that are fun or important to do: You may want to learn Greek or read poetry because you enjoy it, or do anything that you find fun and meaningful, and that's fine. I find golf meaningful, by the way, but that's not a purpose—that's something I enjoy doing. Purpose includes things that I do and that other people do that are also intended to leave a mark on the world, to do something beyond the self, whether it be altruism or a new art or a scientific achievement—something that brings you beyond your own personal enjoyment or sense of personal well-being. We look at purpose across all of the different engagements in life, and I will talk a little bit about what those are, but for the present talk that I am giving now and the concern that all of us share about citizenship, we are concerned for the civic purpose. I am going to talk mostly about what civic purpose means.

Purpose in Young People 12-22

We did a study in general of purpose across all of the domains of life reflected in this one graph, this one data slide. Among young people ages 12-22, only about 1/5 of them (20%) are clearly purposeful in the sense that they know what they want to do and why they want to do it. This finding is nothing surprising; lack of purpose at this early point in life isn't presented as alarming; it reveals that purpose is really a relatively late capacity. Most things develop much more quickly, including math and English and all the other academic and cognitive skills. With

purpose, you see most of the population (80%) either moving towards it or not moving at all. Of course, the distressing quadrant here is the young people who are both low in activity and low in aspiration, meaning that they are not doing much and they don't have many dreams or many hopes. That is almost a quarter of the population. We are concerned about these kids.

Most of the population is in one way or another, moving towards purpose. Between the ages of 22 and 30, most but not all gravitate more and more towards becoming fully purposeful. By age 30 about half the population of young people are developing purpose, finding a sense of direction in life, rather than the 20% at age 22. So where do young people find purpose? Let me just give you a couple of quick glimpses into what kids say about purpose. A 17-year-old boy was very articulate about his lack of purpose: "Well you know, apathy is just fine. I am having a great time just being lazy." His sentiments are not particularly atypical for this group, but he was especially charming and articulate about it, and he is representative of the quadrant that was about 24% of the population. In that quadrant, there are not only young people who are perfectly benignly okay with not having purpose, but some young people who are quite distressed about it: Oh gee, I have nothing to live for." There is a whole spectrum of ways of not having purpose. Some are cynical: "I don't have any goals for my future. What is the big deal about that? It would be fun to travel. Especially when you have someone to pay for it. "

Now some kids have a lot of dreams, but they do not have a lot of activity, and so maybe they are not fully purposeful as they are not moving. This is a girl from the bay area who has a lot of idealistic ideas. It is not clear exactly what they are, but she wants to become more connected. This is an environmental statement, I think, and she is very sincere about non-violence, but she has never done one single thing to prepare to do anything to contribute to these areas. Hopefully action will be in her future. So we call these kids "the dreamers."

Then there are kids who are highly active but don't seem to have a lot of meaning in what they are doing, at least yet. A fine young man from Tennessee actually worked very hard and got into an intelligence outfit. He is just about to begin, but why does he want to do it? Well, it has prestige, it is a really good job, and he talked about this great looking uniform that will impress his girlfriend. You can predict that if he doesn't find the deeper reason for dedicating himself to this very dangerous and difficult profession, he is going to burn out at some point. He is not going to sustain the commitment necessary for this kind of career. I think you can predict that he is likely to run into a mentor in the military who tells him what intelligence is for: that it helps protect and preserve a democratic society, that it is an important part of our national interest, etc. It is very important that he discover those things.

In contrast, there is a fully purposeful young man who wants to be a teacher; he has thought about it carefully, he knows that it is not just a 9-5 job, and he has even thought about how he wants to teach history. Throughout his interview he shared innovative ideas about how he wants to make history interesting to other people, and you can predict that he really is going to do this. He is going to be committed, he is going to go into this as a profession, and he will have a good run at it. So that is what purpose in life looks like at the young ages.

Purpose and Motivation

We have found is a rank order of where young Americans in that age range of 12-22 are finding purpose. Not the majority, but the plurality of young people— 35-40%—find purpose first and foremost having to do with family issues. They want to have a family, they want to have children, they are dedicated to their current family, and everything revolves around those current and future relationships. They want to have a job so they can support their family. They want to have a nice home and live in a nice community that will be a nice place to raise kids,

which is what they want to do. I might have expected that this would be more a female than a male concern, but there were actually about equal numbers of girls and boys who found their purpose in their aspirations to have a family.

Vocation was the next highest concern. This is, of course, an age-old source of purpose: considering the job as a calling. About 1/3 of the population agrees: "I want to be a doctor because I want to cure people." Faith also inspired feelings of purpose: We found about 15% of the national youth population dedicated themselves first and foremost to serving God. Everything they chose to do was for that superordinate goal. We actually found a survey done in 1922 about religious faith and dedication that found 15% of the American population being dedicated to serving God as their first mission in life. We found the same 15% figure from 1922 to be of interest. This has been replicated recently: I have seen recent data sets showing this dedication at 13% and 17%, just clustering around the 15% figure.

The other categories you can see on the slide, but my real reason for showing it is the item at the end of this rank order of the entire menu of sources of purpose—civic and political leadership. We found about 1% of the youth population aspiring to be leaders—being president, being mayor of their town, or chairing a board or something like that as being their main purpose in life. I would suggest that is low for a democracy. That is too low. We weren't doing this a generation ago, but I can tell you from my own memories of high school that many—especially boys-- in the class really wanted to become president or thought they could be. This was not an uncommon aspiration a generation or two ago. So this is, I think, something that educators need to confront as an issue. The diminishing interest or dedication for political service and civic service among our youth population is one of the primary reasons that I got into this subject as an area to channel our purpose research into the area of civic purpose.

I am just picking one statement out of one interview, and this is not good. Regarding American citizenship, one interviewee said, "It is not very special; I don't find being an American citizen being very important." These are different kids. A suggestion of civic obligation brought this response: "Oh my God, I am obligated? What could be possibly worse than that?" It is almost the inverse of the concept of civic virtue, which, of course, is the idea that we all have an obligation to our civic society. "I don't like the whole thing of citizen. That kind of says it in a nutshell." I obviously selected these statements, and they are not typical. But they are not bizarre, unique statements either. You get lots of this. What do we do about this? How does purpose develop? How can we mobilize ourselves to foster civic purpose?

Ways to Find Purpose

Well purpose develops, and I will just highlight a couple of things in this chart. First of all, you have to actually be around or be able to observe adults or people you respect and admire who are doing purposeful things and having consequences. And by the way, this is not speculation; these are findings from our data set. The purposeful kids had somebody they admired who was doing something that was of consequence to the world beyond the self.

Then the child herself or himself needs to have a couple of revelations. These are important. One revelation is that there is some deficit or some problem or issue or something that needs to be improved. It could be something very serious and grim: for example, "Gee, my grandfather died of cancer. Somebody should really come up with a cure for cancer or better ways to treat it. That is really important to do." Or it could be something more on the level of one of our purposeful young people who thought that the current music scales are boring and so he has gone to Julliard and he thinks that he can invent new music scales that are more interesting and will leave a legacy on the music. So it could be a range of things, but they must

find something that needs to be done. Then the second revelation is “I could actually do something to make a difference in this area.” One revelation without the other doesn’t work, but if you put them together, there is some powerful incentive to develop purpose.

Then having the encouragement of a mentor is also essential. The mentors get behind the young person, but usually don’t give them the idea —especially parents. It was very rare when we found a young person who said, “Yeah, I have my purpose to be a lawyer because my dad is a lawyer, and he has a great law firm and he told me to be a lawyer.” We didn’t find many of those cases, but it was important that the young person observe the father or mother being purposeful and that the parent(s) get behind the kid and provide encouragement and resources as necessary.

Civic Purpose Specifically

So that is purpose in general. To translate that into civic purpose is actually pretty direct translation. Now this is not coming from data; these are my speculations. To some extent, we have a project on civic purpose, and I see plenty of evidence for that. We haven’t analyzed the solid data on it, the empirically based findings, but I think there is a good reason to believe the expectations. As kids need to observe a purposeful model in other aspects of life, they need to see inspirational examples of civic virtues. So they need to be told the stories of the founding fathers or stories of people today who are sacrificing for the good of the union, for the good of the country, for the good of other people.

Young people need to be given opportunities to contribute and have the experience of civic participation. I add instruction and constitutional concepts because I don’t want to leave information and knowledge off the table. That is important too. Right now, to the extent that civics is taught, that is all that has been taught. What I am trying to say is that these other

dimensions, which have to do more with character and virtue, are also essential. For the last three points, I drew not from our data set on civic purpose, but from a conference that we gave.

We had a consensus conference at Stanford earlier this year for which we brought in seven people from across ideological lines who were dedicated to the idea of civic education and wanted to see what they would agree on as to what needs to be done in order to foster participatory citizenship in our democracy. The last three points come directly out of the conference. They were things that everyone agreed on, regardless of their background. This was a highly diverse group ethnically, ideologically, and in every other possible way. We all agreed up front that it is absolutely vital for our nation's future that education pay more attention to civics and to history, closely aligned fields, than it is doing right now. These subjects have become marginal, and that is almost a frightening prospect for the future of our country. Every school in the country ought to do much more than it is doing in giving more attention to civic education—everyone agreed. The interesting thing about the report is that it wasn't just bland clichés that everybody could agree on. It was actually kinds of things that people would find a little bit counter-conventional.

One important point was that teaching civics necessitates teaching about power. Politics is about the distribution of power: Who has it, who should have it, how people get it and how people get it in a democracy that is different than how people get it in a totalitarian society, and what is special about a democracy in the way it makes power available to citizens. Related to these concepts are conflicts of power.

The second point concerned developing a positive attachment to the country, including the controversial concept of patriotism. The group did reach agreement, after all of the positions involved were well represented and a lot of debate and reflection had occurred, that patriotism is

actually a virtue, but not patriotism consisting of a blind chauvinism of “my country first” or “my country right or wrong.” Patriotism was accepted in the sense of dedication to the American tradition of liberty which includes free speech and decent. It means caring about the country and caring enough about it to step outside of your own personal interests and think about the good of the union and the good of the country and the good of other people as well and being willing to sacrifice for that. If you are going to make a sacrifice for something, you really have to care about it, beyond a cognitive sense of “well, here is how the society works.” You need an emotional sense: “I care about this, just like I care about my children. I would step in front a bus for my kids.” Well, what would you do for your country? Do you care enough to sacrifice personal interests? I believe that that is an appropriate emotional orientation to cultivate in young people. It is not just appropriate, but essential.

Finally, American ideals. I think we all know that the two core concepts that are really special about the United States from its founding are the concepts of liberty and equality. Yet these are not well understood by young people. We are not born fully understanding these. If you interview young people about these concepts, you find liberty gets translated as freedom to do whatever they want—kids love that kind of idea. But liberty in a political sense comes with a lot of responsibilities: Liberty is the right to follow your conscience. That is what the founders said. It is the liberty to say that no government or other external body can tell me what I believe is right or wrong. I have a right to my beliefs, and I have a right to pursue them in a responsible way, which means in a peaceful way, in a civil way, I have a right to profess them to other people, to argue them, to vote for people I believe are doing the right thing, or to express my views.

Equality to a young person is a very concrete sense that everybody has the same thing. But that is not what the founders or what American statesmen have meant by equality. Equality in their context means equality under the law: equal rights and equal opportunities, not equal consequences and equal results. So these things have to be taught and developed. It takes a certain amount of intellectual capacity to understand what they mean.

The beauty of the American society, when it works, is that liberty and equality are in a kind of complementary relationship, and people feel that by pursuing your goals and your conscience, you have an equal chance at both attaining personal success and getting your beliefs implemented. There is a tension. There is often a tension between liberty and equality, and to some extent that is an inevitable tension because allowing people to have freedom to pursue things means that things are not always going to come out equally in the long run, and reciprocally trying to equalize opportunities and rights sometimes means that you say to people, "Well, your liberty does not extend this far. You don't have the freedom to do certain things if they are going to deprive people of their equal opportunities." So there is a tension, and during the successful times in our history that tension has been constructive and during other times it has been destructive. You are not going to resolve this. We are educators, we are not politicians, so I am not trying to resolve this on the level of society. I maintain that what we have a responsibility to do as educators is to help young people understand this issue—understand this tension and be able to solve it in their own constructive way.

One of the inspirational concepts that we try to work with is the American dream, which is a dream of both equality and liberty, at least it should be. It means a lot to a lot of young kids, and it seems to me to mean even more to immigrant kids, particularly first generation immigrants. One girl expressed, "It is a chance to pursue your dreams daring to be whoever you

want to be. I guess it inspires me. I can pursue my dreams and not just accept what is happening.” A boy who is an immigrant specified, “Freedom of religion, freedom of speech, of action—I believe in that. People can be who they want to be. They shouldn’t be influenced by the government or by anybody else other than themselves, to be themselves.” These young people seem to be capturing what the American dream meant originally, and if I understand it right, the phrase was coined by a historian named James Truslow Adams, who wrote about it as wanting to be who you believe you should be and do what your conscience tells you to do. At the time the dream included being able to support themselves and aspire to a material status of middle class and well off, but it was not the only dimension. The problem I think today is that in the media and maybe even among educators, the American Dream has been reduced to a primacy of material status. Whether the American Dream is still alive depends on whether people's economic status is improving or declining. By googling the phrase “The dying American dream” or “the death of the American dream” you get over five million hits because book after book or article after article is titled or subtitled “The Myth of the American Dream,” “The Death of the American Dream,” “The Diminishing American Dream.” I wrote about this in *Failing Liberty*.

First, the American dream is much richer than its economic aspects, and second, the economic grounds are all normative. They have to do with the average wage, and they certainly don’t apply to individuals' success. To convey to a young person, an aspiring young person, that basically there is no hope of achievement in this society is almost a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is a way of saying to kids, “Give up before you start.” The American dream is still alive for many individuals who achieve success despite severely disadvantaged backgrounds. Social mobility and economic mobility have declined in this country, a problem I don't trivialize. But that does

not mean that the American dream is dead. This young boy's statement should be a lesson for educators on we should not be doing.

Last year, the history teacher told us that the American dream was dead. I didn't believe that at all. The whole class was just sort of silent, and he could tell that we didn't really agree with that. If we didn't dream, we wouldn't be doing anything. We wouldn't be advancing as a society.

I think this young boy is a better philosopher than the history teacher, and the history teacher was, I am sure, being responsible in the sense that he was thinking about all of these books and data pertaining to economic mobility and so on. But I think he missed the heart of the matter, which is that this concept and this belief are for American citizenship and for young Americans, whether they are born here or coming here, and it can and should be part of our national tradition. People all over the world resonate to the American dream. I was in the West Bank traveling around and speaking with lots of young Arab people and they were all talking about the American dream and yet they had a lot of problems with our government and politics. So the American dream is resonant all around the world; it shouldn't and doesn't belong only to America, and it really is the hope of individual advancement and progress and liberty and the chance that you have to actually define your own life and to pursue your dreams. As educators, what we really want to do is motivate young people to participate in a constructive way in their society, and we need to use the strengths of the American tradition in order to do that.

Thank you very much.