



**STUDENT ACTIVISM
IN THE ACADEMY**

ITS STRUGGLES AND PROMISE

EDITED BY

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CHAPTER 2

Communication, Dialogue, and Student Activism

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STUDENTS, BY THE nature of their roles as students, ask questions. One question that sometimes takes a bit of time to form, but eventually emerges as they learn of collective actions making headlines, such as the women's march or the Black Lives Matter movement, is, "Where and how do social change processes start?" The follow-up question they pose is perhaps the more important one: "How do social change movements persist against the backdrop of threats, criticisms, and worse?"

The answers to these questions can be found in the work and impact of ordinary people, to whom we owe a debt for the myriad progressive reforms they have championed throughout history. Yet, in many, if not most educational settings, the lessons to be gleaned from involved, knowledgeable citizens have been largely omitted from formal teaching, leaving too many students without important history and classroom instruction to help them become active participants in promoting justice in our democracy (Zinn, 2015). Imagine if our youth in elementary school, high school, and college discussed the ways in which people have confronted the roots of racial injustice, gender inequality, labor struggles for fair wages and working conditions, immigration policies, and the long overdue corrections required to combat disabilities discrimination. Imagine how students could learn to discern important facts and values in those conversations that bring history alive by learning about collective action efforts.

Activist history, too often maligned for its trouble-making qualities and sidelined from mainstream academic instruction, deserves to be lifted up for the lessons and skills

it provides to students. Such knowledge allows students to build and improve on the work of people who dared to challenge injustices where they existed in favor of a more compassionate, equitable, and fair world. Activists, in this country and around the globe, join together to advocate for a world where we are connected in “a community woven together from sharing and mutual care; a community of concern and responsibility for the equal right to be human and the equal ability to act on that right” (Bauman, 1998, p. 150).

Activist history, in addition to providing essential political and contextual grounding, necessarily examines how communication is the ethical expression of our humanity that emerges as the most essential resource for social change. It is communication that builds enduring relationships vital to every broad-based movement. It is through our interactions that we learn to include and appreciate multiple perspectives as an avenue for bridging differences, which is so necessary for democracy. Communication propels us to express our care for others and invite deliberation on important decision making. Indeed, “Language is one of the most potent resources each of us has for achieving our own political empowerment” (Allen, 2014, p. 22). Communication is the starting point for learning of, talking about, and remedying through social change the struggles, discrimination, and unfairness others have faced. It is educational work that is rewarding, fulfilling, and meaningful.

Of the many invaluable peak experiences in school, at the top of the list often cited by my former students are the times when they met new people of different cultures or when they engaged in discussions about social, political, and economic issues, or when they discovered previously unknown stories and histories that activated a desire to make the world better. When education serves as midwife to democracy’s realization in everyday life (Dewey, 2008), the learning experience is transformed from a passive consideration of disconnected facts into an active, robust space where students exchange ideas and investigate the means by which we can all live together peacefully and productively. In that vibrant setting, educators can introduce students to stories and present-day experiences that demonstrate how profound community change arises from the collective action of people to influence other constituents, including government officials and community groups.

This chapter offers an overview of challenges to democracy that influence the modes and means of inspiring student activism through communication and drawing on the resources embedded in dialogue, public deliberation, collective action, and protest events. There is renewed interest to encourage student voting and political participation after decades of decline (CIRCLE, 2008); thus the time is right for a deep consideration of and teaching about the many forms of democratic expression vital for ensuring a strong democracy. When students can discern the various routes to activism and see themselves as part of a rich history, they will learn how to join people—one, two, three and more at a time—to introduce new ideas powerful enough to move minds, hearts, policies, and laws.

21st-Century Challenges

In the 21st century, students are familiar with crises that are rife with moral consequences. Students feel the impact of climate change conversations, economic downturns, calls for police accountability, assaults on voting rights, and escalating gun violence in schools. They see as well both the robust and feeble attempts by their elected leaders to mitigate the impacts of these calamities and the grassroots organizers who often pose alternative solutions. If we are lucky, we see students' ethical sensibilities awaken as they consider their roles and responsibilities in the controversies.

Students have witnessed the devastating impact of environmental disasters on historically underrepresented communities. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina shed light on how policies of the Army Corp of Engineers contributed to the disaster that flooded New Orleans, leaving more than one-quarter of the city's residents in dire straits, particularly those who were poor and without transportation to evacuate as ordered. Five years later, in 2010, the unprecedented British Petroleum (BP) oil spill off the Gulf Coast generated public outrage and action over unchecked drilling practices. Following a United States District Court ruling that BP was guilty of gross negligence and reckless conduct, the company agreed to pay \$18.7 billion in fines, the largest corporate settlement in U.S. history. Students notice these predicaments, care about them, and in some cases take action. For other students, the situations described here seem beyond their reach to do anything worthwhile.

Economic declines, too, have made headlines repeatedly, impacting the opportunities and hopes students could consider. The recession of 2007 implicated criminal banking practices that led to record bankruptcies, home foreclosures, and plummeting savings accounts. Corporate greed was at the root of the problem. It lined the pockets of financial executives but left the cookie jars of ordinary people empty. Students—most of whom fell into the 99%, which the Occupy Wall Street worked to bring attention to—wondered how such an economic disaster could happen and how the top 1% of the nation's wealthy could continue to amass fortunes while their families lost ground. For the first time in our country's history, these students were among those who would likely have a future less secure than the previous generation (Allison, 2017). Students learned at a tender young age that their elders were not going to be able to ensure a more prosperous future.

Police practices have also galvanized student attention as unarmed Black people were killed, often without provocation, shocking a nation that witnessed so many of the events on cellular phone footage. Trayvon Martin (2012), Miriam Carey (2013), Tamir Rice (2014), Eric Garner (2014), Michael Brown (2014), Walter Scott (2015), and Keith Lamont Scott (2016) were just a few of the country's citizens who lost their lives at the hands of the police, along with 266 unarmed Black people in 2016 alone, according to *The Guardian's* interactive tracking system (2017). Students responded with protests and despair. Three young women did more. In response to what they considered a

state-sanctioned attack on Black people, the three started Black Lives Matter in 2013 to call attention to the crisis in modern militaristic police action.

Voting rights have been under renewed assault in the 21st century, prompting rage and action of faith-based and community groups. From the Moral Monday movement in North Carolina (Schradié, 2018) that galvanized a multi-racial, multi-generational alliance to lawsuits filed against gerrymandering around the country to protests against required photo identification in the voting booth, students were often put in the middle of the controversy. In some states, parents were threatened with legal action and fines if their college-bound students voted outside their hometown precincts. In other locales, student voting booths on or near schools were eliminated in an attempt to limit the influence of student voices (Liebelson, 2014).

Students would not be silent, however, as gun violence in schools escalated, which started with the 1999 Columbine Massacre in Littleton, Colorado, that left 15 dead and 24 wounded. Since then, according to the *Washington Post*, more than 150,000 students attending at least 170 U.S. schools have been victims of gun violence on their campuses (Rozsa, Balingit, Wan, & Berman, 2018). In the aftermath of the most tragic and visible of the shootings, including Virginia Tech in 2007, Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018, parents and other activists have called for comprehensive gun reform. However, most efforts for meaningful change stalled until the Parkland, Florida, teenagers at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School turned their grief into activism with their campaign, #neveragain. Within three weeks of their unyielding, coordinated effort to march on Washington, lobby state officials, coordinate national walkouts, and respond to media interviews, Florida signed into law new gun safety legislation. Florida raised the minimum age for buying guns to 21, mandated a waiting period for gun purchases, and provided funding for increased school security and mental health services (Astor, 2018). Though the bill did not achieve all the goals the Florida teenagers advocated for, it was the first successful gun reform in that state in more than 20 years. More importantly, the work of those teenagers launched a national conversation in defiance of the well-funded political influence wielded by the National Rifle Association.

Of note is that all these crises have taken place amidst a declining faith in democracy, not only in the United States, but also worldwide, according to leading researchers of democratic governance: "The public spheres of informed and engaged citizens seem to be weakening across countries, even in those with well-functioning media landscapes and relatively high levels of political awareness and participation" (Anheier, 2017, p. 15). In thinking of how to better care for democracy, scholars increasingly point to our youth as the ones on whom we must rely to disrupt the status quo in favor of transformational change needed to enhance citizen engagement, improve institutional practices within government, and effect a culture shift that results in people more deeply discussing and debating the fate of our future.

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Still, student activism faces its own challenges. Increasingly, the noble views of responsible citizenship have slipped away with the fervor of consumerism taking root in its place to relegate education as simply a by-product of market-driven values (Giroux, 2012). Absent concerted instruction on what it means to be an involved person in the community—one who can effect change for the good—this most recent generation of college students finds itself asking, “What can I do?” These students wonder how it is possible that the most basic of human needs—health care, employment benefits, a living wage, public education, and voting rights—seem to be dwindling before their eyes. Critical educator Richard Brosio (2017) says teachers often are complicit in hegemonic conceptions of education beholden to market-based capitalism despite the national call to provide more civically engaged studies:

The capitalist economic imperative requests that the schools produce competent, willing workers; whereas, the democratic-egalitarian imperative requests that public education develop critical, well-rounded citizen-workers who are committed to complex roles beyond work—and who may use their critical skills to analyze capitalists work relations, and command of the economy. (p. 569)

Thus, schooling itself is a contested site, where students are compelled through their studies to uphold the hierarchy and inequities that are pervasive in society while also (sometimes, though not often enough) being asked to question and challenge the injustices they witness.

Ensuring the health and vibrancy of our democracy requires an entire community’s effort, to be sure, but there are many, many small and large projects contributing to this goal that are most often started by just a few. It only requires a handful of people who are persistent and clear in their vision to provide the opportunity for more people to be included in determining their collective fate. Admittedly, the elected establishment and even school administrators may not (always) agree with the creative and courageous actions inspired by “people power.” Those leaders may even resist the intrusions, but students are often wise to join with ordinary people struggling simply to secure the most basic human rights. Despite the racism, economic exploitation, gender inequities, and other persistent injustices—or perhaps because of them—students can gain a sense of the moral outrage worthy of pause and applause (Purpel, 1999).

Speaking Out: Modes and Means of Inspiring Activism

Social change begins with a conversation or dialogue among people who care about an issue in their community. Their talk proceeds to decision making about what to do next, oftentimes transforming disparate conversations into a spirited story of the need

to right an injustice. Next, organizing efforts intensify to expand partnerships and build momentum among not a few, but many, people. Finally, the work culminates with speaking out through varied actions to achieve a new vision.

The pattern for advancing positive social change is there, and the examples are easy to locate among the activist communities. The challenge for educators is to make those activist stories widely available to the uninitiated. Faculty can provide important learning experiences for students by including social change readings in the curriculum, inviting community leaders into the classroom, pushing students to do research and take action with the community, and in other ways bridging course content to activism so students can understand fully how social change happens and how academic studies provide a strong basis for students to contribute to communities' efforts for change.

Dialogue

For activists—students and community members alike—conversations that matter revolve around and reflect political matters. As James Baldwin (1963) said in his famous “A Talk to Teachers,” “The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk” (p. 42). The starting point is in having a conversation that serves to illuminate injustices worthy of intervention.

Throughout history, we see many examples of how dialogic moments provided the impetus for protracted struggle leading to important social change. For instance, the battle to secure women's right to vote was won in 1920 with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, more than 70 years after conversations about that needed change began at the landmark Seneca Falls Convention in New York in 1848 (Williams, 2009). The 8-hour workday was standardized and implemented into federal law by the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1937, based on conversations Philadelphia carpenters had in 1791 that continued in various forms and fashion for 146 years before culminating in a labor victory (King, 2004). We applaud now the value of the American Disabilities Act that was enacted in 1990, but students need to know that the conversations and advocacy for people who had been institutionalized and systematically excluded from their communities spanned over five decades (Krahn, Walker, & Correa-De-Araujo, 2015).

Though time intensive, dialogue that emerges in conversations provides important spaces and occasions for people to engage deeply with one another, reflecting on new voices and views that can lead to fresh understandings. Philosopher Martin Buber (1970) noted that dialogue is a critical feature of public life demarcated by a recognition of others as unique, complete beings. For Buber, dialogue is steeped in authenticity, not obfuscation, and respect for the other, not command or control of the other. Mikhail Bakhtin further considered dialogue as a multivocal rendering of the human condition

in which our own voice is moderated and strengthened by the words and utterances of others (1986).

Dialogue in the classroom is the critical first step needed to activate student voices. Doing so requires handing over time and control to students to engage in talk that reveals their values, beliefs, and understanding of the world. Dialogue is an inclusive pedagogical practice that communicates to students that they are active participants in their own learning, rather than passive receptors of information (Freire, 1992). By engaging in dialogue in the classroom, students experience communication as a collaborative method by which to demonstrate mutual commitment, even when the dialogue predictably becomes uncomfortable. Alphonso Lingis (1994) says it is precisely when we are feeling exposed and vulnerable in the presence of another that a sense of community can emerge. Within these genuine relationships, rather than ones predetermined by power dynamics and roles we assume in society, dialogue becomes the medium by which students can reach new understanding (Makau & Marty, 2013). That is, conversations allow us to build and sustain positive relationships in the community. It is a collective task for which we all have a stake and a responsibility (Jovanovic, 2012). It is through dialogue that people can start to imagine and give words to better ideas that alone they may not have been able to conceive. Once a new understanding emerges, the next step is deliberation wherein students make decisions about what needs to be the focus of their action steps.

Deliberation

Activism of any sort in a democracy depends on coordinated action, communication, and decision making among people, which accommodates their diverse voices. Public deliberation, then, is the process by which we can "carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view" (Gastil, 2008, p. 8).

Making deliberation practical in our democracy rests on four requirements of equality: inclusion of different voices; thoughtfulness or genuine consideration of competing claims and arguments; the ability to impact the larger public conversation; and, finally, open and trusting social and political conditions in which deliberations can take place (Fishkin, 2009). Deliberation, thus, thrives on dissenting views as much as it does on the ethical commitment to stay engaged with others in the hopes of arriving at the most just solutions possible.

It would be difficult to find a more perfect arena in which to practice both dialogue and deliberation than a college classroom. There, diversity abounds as students enter with varied backgrounds, experiences, and cultural identities. They are not brought together under the guise of shared backgrounds, as is the case for most social situations in life. Students, in fact, often find themselves for the first time coming face to face with people different from them in virtually every way. While disparities in wealth define

many social relations that in turn limit the participation and possibilities of public deliberation (Swartz, Campbell, & Pestana, 2009), there are fewer of those inequalities in the college classroom. Still, critical pedagogues would argue that our educational institutions, policies, and practices continue to reward privileged students (Oakes, Lipton, Anderson, & Stillman, 2018). So, while the college classroom provides a glorious space for students to explore new ideas and heretofore unknown facts, a critical orientation is needed to support the development of activism. Considering the history and conditions that give rise to current educational practices is one way to do so, as well as weighing current socio-political concerns. When students are granted the opportunity for meaningful communication, they encounter each other as worthy colleagues in the struggle over what "ought we to do" in advancing justice in our democracy (Mouffe, 2000).

Deliberation requires adjudicating among competing claims. In the classroom, we point to critical thinking as the pedagogical tool for teaching students how to examine, critique, and defend claims based on facts, history, reasons, stories, and other evidence. Just as necessary is teaching students to recognize their own and others' belief systems that shape how we see and understand the world. By being attentive to how these larger worldviews influence talk and decision making, students can be better prepared to address obstacles to deliberative processes and framing of the issues under consideration (Makau & Marty, 2013).

Ernesto Cortes (2007) reminds us that our democracy was built on conflict, and thus we need to teach students skills for argumentation and deliberation for them to consider the options surrounding contentious public issues so that they can reach good decisions. To do so, students need to learn their disciplinary content, but they also need to develop the capacities to engage, question, argue, interpret, and contextualize experiences and encounters sufficient to challenge authority when needed. Doing so in tandem with others offers the greatest opportunity for success.

Collective Action

Just as cooperative learning is designed to improve learning outcomes, collective action is intended to coalesce disparate voices to improve the chances of securing social change. The parallels between cooperative learning and collective action are noteworthy. First, both rely on students working together to solve a problem, investigate a concept, and propose solutions. Second, both have increased chances of success when participants inject themselves fully into the process with open-mindedness and creative thinking. Third, when students recognize the power they have to effect change in the classroom and in the community, they are more likely to accept greater responsibility and leadership in future actions.

Marshall Ganz, former farmworker organizer, civil rights activist, and consultant to President Barack Obama's 2008 grassroots campaign efforts, now advocates in his role as a professor for students to consider the merits of organizing through relationship

building, developing common understanding, and taking action (Ganz, 2010). Ganz affirms the power of dialogue to deepen understanding and relationships among people strong enough to withstand inevitable frustrations and questioning that arise from allies and opponents. Dialogue and deliberation teach students confidence. Collective action teaches students that there are others on their side, ready to support them and stand with them. With those essential competencies in place, students can first prepare to assert a voice interconnected to one another to perhaps address smaller objectives to see how progress toward a larger goal is possible.

Stories are powerful ways to organize others toward a social change goal. Stories provide a conversational base to encourage understanding and build community. Undocumented youth, for instance, use their stories as a political tool in the face of deportation to touch people's hearts:

Dreamers who came out transformed themselves from stereotypes or projections into fleshed-out characters with wounds and hopes and universal values. . . . Increasingly, social movement strategists and leaders from across the spectrum—from immigration rights to marriage equality to climate justice—are making narrative a core part of their strategy. (Moe, 2004, p. 47)

Students who share and listen to stories anchored in powerful experiences and connected to structural problems find their imaginations soar to connect with others as a base for collective action.

Strengthening civic participation in this way entails, as well, three other elements: empowering and activating leaders and networks, assembling varied participation building blocks, and offering systemic supports (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). That is, teachers need to tap into the potential of student leaders in their classes and support them in convening other students to reach out to community leaders and organizations. Teachers and students together can look to websites, social media, apps, and games as newer participation mediums. Finally, educators need to consider what supports they can offer to students to foster activist identity development. To do this important work, teachers might reasonably ask, "Who can we introduce students to within our colleges and universities where they will be warmly received and nurtured in activism? How can we likewise introduce students to community members engaged in advocacy work so that students can join a solid support structure to help them deepen their learning about activism?"

Speaking Out Through Protest and Other Actions

Once students have learned about an issue through in-depth dialogue and discussion, deliberated the merits of various positions, and organized collectively around a common approach to tackling injustice, the work turns toward speaking out, starting or joining

protests, leading petition drives, attending legislative action committees, and in other ways confronting what requires change in visible ways.

Leading up to and engaging in speaking out benefits from the support, encouragement, and guidance of teachers, who themselves are learned and practiced in such forms of activism. This way of teaching advances *parrhesia* or free speech and fearless speech (Foucault, 2001). Epicureans in Greek times steered students to self-discovery of the truth by dialogic means in the hopes that students would in turn develop the courage to speak out publicly (Foucault, 2001). This guidance requires, among other instruction, the retelling of stories of success and failure to offer students a glimpse into the challenging work that undergirds the spectacle of many protest actions. Too often, students assume that marches and sit-ins are designed only to gain media attention. They assume that protests and marches are absent in the infrastructure required to gain traction in solving real problems. Those students are sometimes correct in their assessment; however, more often their views have been shaped by the dominant culture that caricatures dissent. When students learn from community organizers that protests are only one leg of a much larger strategy, they can better reflect on the varied options social change agents use in their work. With that knowledge in hand, students can discuss, deliberate, choose directions, and then prioritize certain actions at certain times designed to achieve specified results within a much broader program for change.

Communicating as an activist is a vehicle for self-realization and fulfillment when students are afforded authentic and genuinely equal opportunities to participate (Chafe, 1980). Indeed, amplifying our voices is more important than ever in a society where there is a cacophony of distracting messages created to keep students from understanding injustices, questioning assumptions and power relations, asserting the need for change, and taking action! This is not new. Fannie Lou Hamer recognized as much in her work as a civil rights activist. Her formal schooling ended at the age of 12, but that did not stop her from learning all she could to advance the rights of people. As an adult, she was badly beaten during the summer of 1962 when she worked to encourage voter registration in the South. Hamer again did not stop her activism, and for the next 15 years she traveled around the country telling her stories of growing up poor and Black to willing audiences. Her most notable speech was delivered at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, but in every one of her speeches, Hamer sought to empower people to recognize their own potential for activism. In 1964, Hamer offered this admonition to a Mississippi audience:

I don't want to hear you say, "Honey, I'm behind you." Well move, I don't want you back there. Because you could be two hundred miles behind. I want you to say, "I'm with you." And we'll go up this freedom road together. (Hamer, 2011, p. 56)

Hamer was clear in proclaiming the critical need to continue cultivating activism as a logical response to persistent injustices.

Conclusion

Raising a fist. Wearing a hoodie. Taking a knee during the national anthem. Voting. Signing a petition. Participating in a march. Protesting. Boycotting. Organizing a candlelight vigil. Attending a forum, conference, teach-in, or meeting. Joining a group. Sponsoring a program. Starting a movement. Disrupting public order. These examples of student activism, evident today and in the past, are fueled by the passion to right what are seen as wrongs in the world. The staging of spectacular events may be the most visible manifestation of student activism, but the most enduring feature of the planning, implementation, and aftermath of such action is sustained dialogue.

As students navigate their higher education journey, they do so in tandem with world events. Local and global disruptions surface the inequities and injustices that persist. For many students, exposure to discussions and analyses of these events in classroom settings is often their first introduction to meaningful civic and political engagement. Professors, teachers, mentors, and college staff thus have an opportunity and responsibility to educate for democracy by introducing the varied modes of response to these critical local and world affairs (American Association of Colleges & Universities [AAC&U], 2018).

Communication is at the center of realizing the American dream; not the dream of accumulation and wealth or making it to the top, but rather the dream of equity, justice, inclusion, care, and commitment to the general welfare of all so that together we can address the lingering needs in our communities. Teachers who recognize the value of communication and dialogue in democratic pedagogy tap into the synergy of education, community activists, and student interest in ways that bring forward the gifts and resources of all together.

In doing so, students learn to situate their own power as an ethical responsibility. For too long and in too many ways, power has been exercised to subvert the potential of meaningful, positive social change. A view of challenging power presented throughout this chapter is one that is nimble, yet forceful and productive in expression through speech, public demonstrations, and more informal conversations.

The cornerstone values of our First Amendment of free speech and freedom to assemble are ones teachers can introduce to students to inspire them to follow in the footsteps of those who sacrificed their time and energy to ensure democracy for all. Our cultural and historical roots point to people, who time and again offered conversational openings as a starting point for activism. That offer, to invite others into solidarity around a public concern, starts with the welcome, a communicative act that reflects a responsibility for the other as an ethical imperative (Levinas, 1998).

Leading critical pedagogue Henry Giroux concurs, as this chapter has espoused, that for student activism to become an education priority as insurance for protecting

the future of our democracy, communication, and more specifically, dialogue, should be at the center of our instruction. He says:

Making the political more pedagogical means treating students as critical agents; making knowledge problematic and open to debate; engaging in critical and thoughtful dialogue; and making the case for a qualitatively better world for all people. (Giroux, 2017, p. 632)

Teachers need to teach important modes and means of inspiring activism. They need to infuse history lessons into current debates and to foreground the important work of social change agents in the past. Doing so will allow today's students to see themselves as active agents in a legacy of struggle for justice. Zygmunt Bauman (1988) rightly defined the project of reclaiming democracy and our sense of community as that which offers equality of resources for all in ways that can prevail even in the face of individual incapacities and misfortunes.

Our communicative practices define our values, and they need to be nurtured inside and out of the classroom to best prepare students to tap into the possibilities of speaking with others, collaborating, and engaging in cooperative ventures for the purpose of advancing social justice. Talking across difference offers that critical opportunity to bridge the divide in social capital that too often keeps us apart by race, social class, religion, socio-economic status, political affiliations, and professional identities. Further, teachers need to teach students to recognize that difference, and even conflict, are not deterrents to, but instead sources of energy for, meaningful community action. Conversations strong enough to change the cultural narrative will not start by seeking consensus, but instead will require courage to illuminate where democracy has fallen short of its ideals and where democracy is needed most.

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