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Always somehow behind the curve, I recently finished reading Erin Gruwell’s, *The Freedom Writers Diary* (1999). As these students came alive from the pages of their writings, I was transported to so many classrooms by so many teachers who sincerely believe they can change the world. “Unteachable” and “at-risk” young people found their voices by comparing the trials and tribulations of others with their own lives and circumstances. Learning the skill of reflection allowed them the opportunity to see things differently, become proactive rather than reactive, and position themselves as agents of change in a personal sphere.

Inspired teaching requires personal sacrifice as does transformative learning. Self-examination can be emotionally expensive. As faculty members prove their own vulnerabilities by working in service-learning modalities, they model the kind of dedication, patience, and understanding so necessary (and so rare) in our world of hurry-up noise pollution. I believe that as you read the pages of this journal, you will hear the echoes of mentoring faculty in the words of the students we hope will step up in times of increasing international chaos and alienation. There’s an old Army divisional song that contains the line, “They’re tearing me down to build me over again…” That’s the job of the Army, to take the child and create the responsible adult. It’s also the job of educators. We can’t stay the same and expect change and change is the hardest thing we ever do as members of the human family.

I smiled at one of my students who wrote in a recent reflection, “Service-learning is really character building in addition to being educational.” It made me curious as to when exactly, character building and education became separated in her thinking. Our college’s definition of leadership is “not the position you hold but the difference you make.” I’ve always made the assumption that the difference you make in this case, is positive, affirming, uplifting, enlightened. I suppose I’ve made the leap that leadership learned through service is most possible when coupled with careful reflection, the type

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of reflection that requires naked, vulnerable, honest examination. Maybe this is the best skill we can hope comes from service-learning and leadership studies at the undergraduate level, a willingness to look critically at self and begin the task of finding a place and peace in the world. It’s all about character, and courage, and commitment, and confidence.

Perhaps the greatest growth I’ve observed in my students through intentional attention to service as a building block to leadership is an honest departure from the egocentric trends so recognizable in alienated youth. One of my students wrote, “I remind myself daily that when looking at clients, volunteers, and employers (at the service site), we all look the same, feel the same, and breathe the same air as one another.” Another reflected, “My service-learning is changing my life because when I look at some of the people there, I feel touched and I want to reach out and help.” Understanding our own capacities prompted another who worked at a local food bank to write, “I don’t have to be saving the world, but just feeding a family is what I believe is making a change.” Character counts.

As you read the articles in this issue of the journal, you will come to understand with greater clarity the growth of character as students reflect on their experiences.

--Joyce Fields--