

WHAT LIFE ASKS OF US

By DAVID BROOKS / © NY Times / 27 Jan 2009

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/27/opinion/27brooks.html?_r=1

A few years ago, a faculty committee at Harvard produced a report on the purpose of education. “The aim of a liberal education” the report declared, “is to unsettle presumptions, to defamiliarize the familiar, to reveal what is going on beneath and behind appearances, to disorient young people and to help them to find ways to reorient themselves.”

The report implied an entire way of living. Individuals should learn to think for themselves. They should be skeptical of pre-existing arrangements. They should break free from the way they were raised, examine life from the outside and discover their own values.

This approach is deeply consistent with the individualism of modern culture, with its emphasis on personal inquiry, personal self-discovery and personal happiness. But there is another, older way of living, and it was discussed in a neglected book that came out last summer called “On Thinking Institutionally” by the political scientist Hugh Heclo.

In this way of living, to borrow an old phrase, we are not defined by what we ask of life. We are defined by what life asks of us. As we go through life, we travel through institutions — first family and school, then the institutions of a profession or a craft.

Each of these institutions comes with certain rules and obligations that tell us how to do what we’re supposed to do. Journalism imposes habits that help reporters keep a mental distance from those they cover. Scientists have obligations to the community of researchers. In the process of absorbing the rules of the institutions we inhabit, we become who we are.

New generations don’t invent institutional practices. These practices are passed down and evolve. So the institutionalist has a deep reverence for those who came before and built up the rules that he has temporarily taken delivery of. “In taking delivery,” Heclo writes, “institutionalists see themselves as debtors who owe something, not creditors to whom something is owed.”

The rules of a profession or an institution are not like traffic regulations. They are deeply woven into the identity of the people who practice them. A teacher’s relationship to the craft of teaching, an athlete’s relationship to her sport, a farmer’s relation to her land is not an individual choice that can be easily reversed when psychic losses exceed psychic profits. Her social function defines who she is. The connection is more like a covenant. There will be many long periods when you put more into your institutions than you get out.

In 2005, Ryne Sandberg was inducted into the baseball Hall of Fame. Heclo cites his speech as an example of how people talk when they are defined by their devotion to an institution:

“I was in awe every time I walked onto the field. That’s respect. I was taught you never, ever disrespect your opponents or your teammates or your organization or your manager and never, ever your uniform. You make a great play, act like you’ve done it before; get a big hit, look for the third base coach and get ready to run the bases.”

Sandberg motioned to those inducted before him, “These guys sitting up here did not pave the way for the rest of us so that players could swing for the fences every time up and forget how to move a runner over to third. It’s disrespectful to them, to you and to the game of baseball that we all played growing up.

“Respect. A lot of people say this honor validates my career, but I didn’t work hard for validation. I didn’t play the game right because I saw a reward at the end of the tunnel. I played it right because that’s what you’re supposed to do, play it right and with respect If this validates anything, it’s that guys who taught me the game ... did what they were supposed to do, and I did what I was supposed to do.”

I thought it worth devoting a column to institutional thinking because I try to keep a list of the people in public life I admire most. Invariably, the people who make that list have subjugated themselves to their profession, social function or institution.

Second, institutional thinking is eroding. Faith in all institutions, including charities, has declined precipitously over the past generation, not only in the U.S. but around the world. Lack of institutional awareness has bred cynicism and undermined habits of behavior. Bankers, for example, used to have a code that made them a bit stodgy and which held them up for ridicule in movies like “Mary Poppins.” But the banker’s code has eroded, and the result was not liberation but self-destruction.

Institutions do all the things that are supposed to be bad. They impede personal exploration. They enforce conformity.

But they often save us from our weaknesses and give meaning to life.

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