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Communication, Social Justice, and Joyful Commitment

Stephen John Hartnett

Combining an overview of the history of communication scholarship with lessons learned from 20 years of experience as a prison abolitionist and peace activist, Hartnett argues that the discipline of communication can be enriched intellectually and made more politically relevant by turning our efforts toward community service, problem-based learning, and new means of collective scholarly production. Drawing from his personal experiences to address the consequences and opportunities of engaging in such work, Hartnett calls upon communication scholars to forego heroic narratives of triumph, instead focusing on what he calls “joyful commitment,” a Buddhist-inspired sense of seeking fulfillment via solidarity with others.

Keywords: *Activism; Commitment; Communication Scholarship; Social Justice; Solidarity*

For the past 20 years I have been venturing into America’s prisons and jails to teach college-level communication classes and creative writing workshops; my strong impression is that the vast majority of my imprisoned students have been caged, in large part, because of their communicative illiteracy. The cycle is clear: trouble at home dovetails with trouble at school; getting pushed out of school and home leads to gang affiliation and underground means of moneymaking; those illegal occupations produce an array of dangerous situations that inevitably lead to violence;

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at each stage of the cycle, young men and women of all races, who should be learning how to read, write, and speak more clearly, are instead indoctrinated into a world of thuggish violence; and then eventually they get busted and end up in the slammer, wondering what the hell went so wrong. Even while generations of inherited poverty entwine with the crushing realities of neoliberalism to leave these marginalized and then criminalized Americans little chance of advancement—they are literally doomed, part of a permanent caste of surplus bodies unneeded by post-Fordist capitalism—most of them will tell you that at some point in the cycle outlined above, if they had only known how to communicate more effectively, they might have talked or written their way out of danger. Somewhere, somehow, whether it was in the kitchen or the principal's office, on the street or in the courtroom, dealing with a boss or a family member or a detective, greater communicative fluency could have made a life-changing difference. And so my students come to our classes and workshops looking for pragmatic answers: They expect me to bring to them the tools of persuasion, argumentation, better writing, and clearer thinking—not just because they want to land jobs on the outside but because *they want redemption*, they want to reclaim their lives from the numbness and mumbling bequeathed to them by years of neglect and violence. My students understand, then, that mastering the basic tools of communication is the first step toward rebuilding their lives, to becoming citizens, to exercising agency, to being able, once free from prison—and often while still imprisoned—to make a difference in their communities. For these imprisoned learners and creators, studying communication is a soul-saving route to improving themselves and pursuing social justice.¹

How curious, then, to realize that for many of our colleagues in the field, communication is still largely studied and taught not as a component of social justice but as a set of politically vacuous truisms or as tools for equipping would-be corporate warriors to make even more money. But that orientation is finally changing. For example, in his 2008 National Communication Association Presidential Address, Art Bochner delivered a rousing speech entitled “Communication’s Calling: The Importance of What We Care About.” Using his presidential bully pulpit to try to nudge his assembled listeners toward a deeper commitment to engaging in social justice scholarship, Bochner asked communication scholars to “focus attention on the conscience and authenticity of our discipline” (2008, p. 15). To demonstrate that he was not unilaterally trying to wrench the field in a new direction, Bochner reminded us that when the discipline of communication was first institutionalized in 1914 as the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking, “We may not have been outlaws, but certainly we were rebels” (p. 15). Fleeing the esoteric bickering of English departments, our intellectual forebears saw themselves as venturing off into new territory that would be marked by pragmatism and prudence marshaled in the service of the public good. With the ancient Greeks as their guide, those founders hoped that teaching basic speaking skills could enhance democracy by enabling citizens both to argue more clearly and to listen more fully. Using this history as his warrant for asking the audience to think about how their careers could include reflection on questions of social justice, NCA President Bochner

concluded his speech by reminding us that our students come to us seeking not only job skills and citizenship training but also deeper philosophical guidance regarding “how they should live” (p. 19). We should be clear that most of us do not have answers to that question, but just asking it amounts to a welcome turn toward understanding how our profession could address such questions as *How do we live, and how might we live differently? How can our teaching, research, and service make a difference in the world?* We need not settle for being technocrats, Bochner was arguing, stopping just short of begging us to engage instead in research, teaching, and service that confront oppression, strive to empower others, and do so while humbly seeking answers to life’s big questions. As Bochner suggested in an exchange following his lecture, we should be asking “What is our mission? . . . What can and should we do to live better and more fulfilling lives as scholars, teachers, and citizens” (personal communication, June 1, 2009)?²

NCA President Bochner could raise these questions largely because the field has undergone a dramatic transformation in the past two decades: Fueled by a new generation of scholars committed to focusing their talents on ending gender inequity, racial discrimination, the machinery of empire, and the prison-industrial complex, we are slowly but surely shedding our legacy of being technocrats and Yes Men (and Women) for the state, instead assuming increasingly visible roles as national leaders in multifaceted movements for social justice. To further this trend, this essay engages in four moves. First, it reviews some of the lingering conditions that hinder our pursuit of engaged social justice scholarship and activism; this section of the essay is written in a traditional, academically critical mode. Second, it offers an intellectual history of the movements and subgenres of communication scholarship that have led us to this juncture of our field’s evolution; this part of the essay is written in a retrospective and celebratory mode. Third, it offers some cautionary tales and then some thankful reckonings regarding the dilemmas and rewards of pursuing engaged social justice scholarship and activism; because these pages are based on my personal experiences, this aspect of the essay is autobiographical, even confessional. Fourth, the essay closes with a meditation on the existential question of how to approach scholarship and activism in the face of overwhelming obstacles; this closing movement of the essay is written in a philosophical, even sermonic mode. Written amidst the worst economic crash since 1929, in a season when talk of another deadly pandemic (this time the H1N1, “Swine Flu”) fills the airwaves, as the nation continues to pour billions of dollars into catastrophic wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and as the homeless roam the streets below my third-floor window in alcoholic and mental health stupors, I hope both to add a sense of urgency to Bochner’s call and to answer his question about “what is our mission?” by advocating for engaged communication scholarship that teaches, studies, and joins political projects committed to building social justice.

Those of us who already engage in such projects suspect that we might not end racism or imperialism or the prison-system in our lifetimes; consequently, even as we tackle the day’s pressing problems, we also need to find ways to not become consumed by those struggles. Indeed, we have all learned that the haggard activist, angry

and enflamed, accusing others of their transgressions while embodying anxiety, achieves little, alienates many, and often succumbs to despair. Working toward the third phrase that comprises my title, *joyful commitment*, thus asks us to pledge ourselves to work for social justice *and* for personal growth, to be both radical in our demands *and* gentle in our demeanor, both outraged by inequality and oppression *and* joyous in our commitments to end them. As Martin Luther King Jr. asked in a speech from 1957, where he called upon the power of revolutionary love, “*Agape* means nothing sentimental or basically affectionate. It means understanding, redeeming good will for all men [and women]. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return” (p. 22). As this essay unfolds, I thus ask my colleagues to consider how the field of communication can work for social justice while embodying joyful commitment, hence honoring King’s call to build our political projects from a place of “overflowing love” (p. 22; see also Hartnett, 2007; Kelly, 2005).

Citizenship Training, Embedded Intellectuals, & Theory Wolves

If you add up the pedagogical efforts of the tens of thousands of us who have taught public speaking over the past century, then the number of students we have helped to learn how to speak in public, write clean sentences, use libraries, and engage in the other intellectual and creative tasks that empower them to be more effective citizens would number in the hundreds of thousands. As the founders of the field knew well, public speaking skills (and increasingly the other mediated forms of communication that we teach and study) are tools of persuasion and enlightenment, even weapons for progressive social change when handled adroitly. And so I would like to begin this essay by suggesting that we should all feel a sense of pride in the fact that the field of communication is based in part on a commitment to enhancing civic engagement. As Jerry Hauser (2004) observes, harking all the way back to “democracy’s Athenian roots,” and using the term “rhetoric” to encapsulate the modes of citizenship training that I am alluding to here, “Rhetoric lay at the heart of citizenship and of the citizen’s public identity. This position of centrality is rhetoric’s birthright” (pp. 1, 12). From this perspective, our discipline is enmeshed to its very core in the larger promises of democratic governance, Enlightenment principles, and civic life. I will focus my comments below on other matters, but want to foreground my support for the premise that teaching communication is a noble civic duty.³

We have been taught to celebrate this tradition of teaching public speaking and other communication skills as the building blocks of democracy; and while we could question that “birthright,” particularly the ways it has ignored questions of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationalism, and other political topics, I propose that we also need to deepen an ongoing conversation about some other troubling skeletons. For a new generation of critical communication historians is unearthing the startling ways that our field, far from being committed to citizenship training and democratic engagement, has in fact functioned from its inception as a tool of the state. Dating back to the decades after World War I and then accelerating dramatically around World War II, these critics argue, the field of communication has been both

embedded within and eagerly complicit with the National Security State. As Jack Bratich notes, “The history of communication is bound up with state and corporate interests” (2008, p. 25). Feeding off of grants and contracts from such “interests,” communication scholars were implicitly embedded within the political imperatives and intellectual frameworks of the Cold War state, hence functioning less as bearers of brave new truths and teachers of engaged citizens than as clerks for the massive machinery that spewed out generations of dogmatic anticommunism, love of the Bomb, cheerful consumerism, and unquestioned U.S. international dominance (Taylor & Hartnett, 2000; see also Greene & Hicks, 2005). The field’s record of studying, let alone confronting, the inequalities embodied in gendered and racializing discourses are equally thin, albeit improving rapidly. Save for the recent efforts of John McHale and those of us associated with PCARE, our field’s stand on prisons and the death penalty has amounted to an almost century-long silence (see Hartnett & Larson, 2006; McHale, 2002, 2007; PCARE, 2007). Surely, for every one communication scholar who has worked alongside an NGO or as a community activist, there have been many more who worked either as consultants for the state or as the servants of monster corporations that make millions of dollars by exploiting the labor of those invisible workers most communication scholars will never see, hear from, or think about. And still today, if you flip through the announcements of recent grant recipients in any issue of *Spectra*, it will become clear where many of our colleague’s solidarities lie. Both historically and in the present, then, many members of the field of communication have served and continue to serve those in power—in short, an alarming number of our peers are clerks for the state.⁴

Any discussion about the future of the field of communication and its commitments to teaching, studying, and engaging social justice issues must therefore confront this curious contradiction buried within our institutional DNA: historically, our notions of how public speaking can enhance the democracy have been so limited regarding race, class, gender, and other obvious political issues, that our call to engage in citizenship training has amounted to producing departments of well-behaved bourgeois debaters. There are triumphs buried in the dross, to be sure, but they are too few and too far between. At the same time, the field’s high-flying grant-getting stars have tended to favor projects sanctioned by corporate interests and National Security State imperatives, meaning that much of our work has not so much enhanced the democracy as enriched capitalists and provided the military-industrial complex with the veneer of intellectual legitimacy. As we shall see below, one response to this predicament has been to turn to European critical theorists, albeit with curious consequences.⁵

Thus far I have applauded those who have chosen to teach basic communication skills to students so that they might become more engaged citizens; I then turned briefly to those of us who have chosen to work for corporate or National Security State interests. But I am concerned here with a different group of scholars—I shall call them *theory wolves*—who have learned to play the tenure game for their own benefit while producing works about tendential subjects for miniscule audiences engaged in no real-world struggle. In short, such scholars have chosen the route of elegant

irrelevance; they are, in the most dismissive sense of the word, *academic*. To a large extent, the rise of this subculture of postmodern cynics has followed the gradual but now well-nigh triumphant integration of European critical theory into the field of communication. This process of cross-continental cross-fertilization has matured, however, in a manner that has sapped the giants of critical theory of much of their original, countercultural force.

When I first encountered European critical theorists in an English department in the late 1980s, it was understood that Marcuse and Adorno and Horkheimer and Sartre, even Freud—the God figures who launched what has become contemporary critical theory—were above all else cultural activists. I do not have the space here to delve into the details of their fights against the triple horrors of genocidal fascism from within their home countries, imperialist communism from the East, and runaway brain-dead capitalism from the West, but we should remember that they launched critical theory in the 1940s both to help make sense of and then to fight against a new stage of multinational power, not to amuse themselves or to get tenure. For the European critical theorists many of us have come to love to cite, the stakes were literally about life and death. Recall the conditions surrounding Walter Benjamin's now-canonical 1940 essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Writing as an exiled Jew in Paris during that dreary winter (the fascists stormed the town in May, 1940), Benjamin wrote from the edge of an abyss: He believed the world as he knew it was passing before his eyes, for each new day brought another round of Nazi atrocities, another insult to his sense of all that was right and good and worth living for (on the dire circumstances surrounding Benjamin writing this essay, see Broderson, 1996, pp. 242–250, 250–262). Having witnessed the murder of his friends and colleagues, the sacking of nations, the destruction of great works of art and literature, and the production of propaganda so gross that it makes the Bush White House appear prudent, Benjamin warned that "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins," for he understood that history's victors have a habit of forgetting the dead, of stepping across their bloodied bodies on the way to champagne brunches celebrating the march of power (1969/1940, p. 255). For Benjamin, writing what we now call "critical theory" was nothing less than an effort to make sense of a world that was diving headlong into madness—his work was sophisticated, aesthetic, and philosophical, but above all else it was a political commentary on the end of justice.⁶

In that same vein, many of that generation of European theorists whom we have come to love to reference were either directly involved in or heavily influenced by the social movements that erupted across the continent in 1968 (see Quattrocchi, 1998). But something strange has happened as such European intellectual activists have become embedded in U.S. universities, where their politically motivated and culture-shaping projects have been turned into blueprints for an endless stream of essays and books focusing on the intricacies of representation, often with psychoanalytic overtones that explicitly focus on the self or the psyche rather than the community or the political. And so it is hard to imagine how those enthusiastic graduate students and assistant professors using Barthes or Baudrillard to perform intricate semiotic analyses of select scenes of *Baywatch*, or marshaling Kristeva to write

scandalously sexy analyses of the footnotes in Freud or Foucault, or riffing on the mirror stage as enunciated by Lacan and appropriated by Irigaray, are going to empower anyone, much less challenge the status quo. In fact, if you look through any recent humanities-based journals then it will become clear that the turning of critical theory into a high-minded kind of impenetrably dense nonsense has gone so far that many of these essays could actually be read as satires. Recall the amusing case of Alan Sokal's hoax in this regard, then read these works aloud, wait for your guests to stop guffawing, and ask yourself, *What is being said? What is being argued for? What are the stakes at play?*⁷

Fueled by the pressure to publish-or-perish, academics have turned in recent decades toward ever-tighter forms of intellectual tribalism, hence resulting less in broad cultural criticism of sweeping relevance than in esoteric works of minutiae published in journals of such small circulation that they might legitimately be called secret. As Mark C. Taylor (2009) argues in an editorial in *The New York Times*, under these conditions "each academic becomes the trustee not of a branch of the sciences, but of limited knowledge that all too often is irrelevant for genuinely important problems. A colleague recently boasted to me that his best student was doing his dissertation on how the medieval theologian Duns Scotus used citations" (p. A21). Communication has been particularly susceptible to this trend toward hyperspecialization, for our historical insecurity in the face of other, more well-established fields such as history and literature, to say nothing of the sciences, has left us less interested in broad-ranging scholarship than in turf-building. As William Nothstine, Carole Blair, and Gary Copeland (1994) argue, this institutional insecurity led early generations of communication scholars to pursue a tightly delineated version of disciplinarity-as-isolation, of intellectual production based on "quarantine[ing] academic experience from contamination by knowledge, practice, and experience from outside the discipline" (p. 21). The result was a field shackled by provincialism. The turn toward European critical theorists could be understood on the one hand, then, as offering a welcome break from this imposed provincialism; yet on the other hand, it could also be read as the culmination of the quest for tribal security. Indeed, when microscopically focused scholarship mixes with the heady critical theory discussed above, the resulting work can appear awe-inspiringly intelligent, for here is the work of *experts*, high priests of a rarified version of intellectual production. At the same time, such works are often received by those outside the high council of experts not only as impenetrably dense and gleefully irrelevant but even as willfully perverse, as if our research was not meant to be edifying, enlightening, and empowering so much as endured. Some of the consequences of the proliferation of this postmodern cynicism have been articulated powerfully by Regina Barreca (2009), who argues that the practitioners of this brand of high-fallutin' hyperdisciplinarity are

the wolves, the con artists of university life. They could talk for an hour or write for twenty pages with convincing authority and yet leave an audience unsure of what, precisely, was under discussion. They used jargon as a form of ritual magic, to obscure and confuse rather than to explain and illuminate. . . . Unswervingly hostile to their colleagues who remained in the academic underbrush, they adopted

detached, sardonic poses at conferences. . . . They liked their key phrases; they had a habit of repeating themselves to the point that their signature lines were not so much a refrain as a sign of pathology. . . . Everything they approached was intellectual roadkill. . . . The resulting pieces of criticism are about as useful as origami but not nearly as aesthetically pleasing (p. 12).⁸

We need to be careful when encountering such passages not to mistake personal sour grapes for an intellectual argument; and we need to be equally careful not to allow such critiques of over-the-top theory wolves to slip into an across-the-board anti-intellectualism; still, Barreca illustrates how postmodern cynicism has changed our conferences, our classrooms, our departmental relationships, and our modes of production. One of the obvious consequences of this form of intellectual production is “a gradual erosion of the public’s good will” regarding what universities do and stand for (Callan & Immerwahr, 2008, p. A56). When tax dollars are poured into departments that celebrate faculty who produce jargon-riddled nonsense that treats the rest of the world like so much roadkill, it should come as no surprise to find politicians (and some students’ parents) screeching about the inanity, and even depravity, of intellectuals. (There are many factors involved here, but it is significant that “state investment per public university student” stood at “a 25-year low in 2005,” Newfield, 2009, p. A128.) And so, even as they invoke theorists who were once hounded because of their oppositional politics, and even as they write in tones of high indignation laced with terms like *intervention* and *counterhegemonic* and *transgressive* and *border-crossing* (Sokal’s spoof offers a compendium of such terms), the much-published practitioners of postmodern cynicism have become a political liability: They are the new easy targets for anti-intellectuals who want to continue cutting our budgets or even shut down our departments. The response to such attacks is not to cower in silence, to dumb down our writings, or to run from the controversy, but rather, to create pieces of moral clarity and writerly elegance wherein we demonstrate our central roles in enhancing democratic life.⁹

The Trend Toward Social Justice Scholarship

In comparison to the providers of the basic (albeit provincial) tools of citizenship, the clerks of the state and corporation, and the postmodern cynics and theory wolves, I am happy in the rest of this essay to chronicle another trend in our field: the move toward producing work that engages in, celebrates, and hopes to spur additional social justice activism. This work can take many forms, and so in the following pages I attempt to delineate its three major strands. As my comments unfold, they will appear to assume a loosely chronological narrative of progress based on the evolution of distinct modes of intellectual production; but, in fact, the different genres of social justice scholarship addressed here overlap both temporally and methodologically—the boundaries are fuzzy.

In its earliest form, the foundations for today’s social justice research involved the work of scholars who wrote traditional academic studies analyzing the communicative habits of groups who fought for justice. These were not works of advocacy but of

analysis, meaning that they were neither arguing for a political position nor engaging in collaborations with the groups in question; rather, these works employed traditional notions of academic objectivity, personal remove, and political neutrality to diagnose the communicative habits of others. Emerging as part of the vast cultural upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and flying under the flag of studying Social Movements (often abbreviated as SMO), this early work was pushed by, among others, Herb Simons at Temple, Charlie Stewart at Purdue, James Andrews at Indiana, and Leland Griffin at Northwestern. Working in an era when even humanistic communication professors tried to mimic the norms of social science, and still laboring under what can only be called Aristotelian assumptions about the norms of argumentation, these early SMO scholars bucked accepted norms by studying the messy on-the-ground agency of grassroots activists fighting for social justice. Still, to appear less like political treatises and more like the social science work of their peers, these early practitioners of SMO studies often took Hegelian views of their subjects by observing them from on high, diagnosing their communicative habits, and creating typologies of SMOs, complete with analyses of their developmental stages, rhetorical norms, interorganizational models of conflict, and different forms of public impact. In one of the seminal essays describing this branch of communication scholarship, Simons, Mechling, and Schreier (1984) noted that their SMO work was “designed to help readers better understand movement rhetoric; to guide critics and historians in analyzing it; and, *in a small way* [italics added], to suggest implications for activists” (p. 792; see also Andrews, 1969; Griffin, 1964; Simons, 1970). That *in a small way* tells us much about the political and professional constraints under which Simons and his colleagues were forging a new subgenre of communication scholarship (see Morris & Browne, 2006; Simons, 2001; Stewart, Smith, & Denton, Jr., 1989). Still, I want to be clear that my characterization of early SMO work is not meant as a critique but as a celebration of an important developmental stage within the profession, for those of us who work in and for social justice movements today would not be able to do so were it not for the groundbreaking work of Simons, Stewart, Andrews, Griffin, and their colleagues.

Following the lead of these and other pioneers, it was not long before a new generation of communication scholars began producing a stronger version of SMO work that involved writing articles or books that sought to debunk the mythologies holding the powerful in place—these were explicitly political projects meant to demystify the cultural fictions that sustain inequality. A halting step in this direction was the 1973 founding of the National Communication Association–sponsored *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, which, until recently, seemed less interested in publishing articles about grassroots activism than about the “applied” uses of communication in consulting appointments—still, the *JACR* marked a turn toward social justice scholarship. Although he is a political scientist rather than a communication scholar, one of the seminal studies in this nascent genre was Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, first published in 1980, wherein Zinn, beginning with the pilgrims and moving through the Vietnam War, offered a stunning revision of U.S. history (see also Zinn & Arno, 2004). A remarkable teaching resource and intellectual

accomplishment, the book made a powerful impact upon a generation of scholars interested in infusing their work with political significance (for a history of applied communication see Frey & SunWolf, 2009). Following the lead of early SMO studies, and feeding off Zinn's example, communication (and other disciplinary) scholars were soon engaging in projects of well-documented debunking.

As an obvious outcome of such work, communication scholars began to celebrate the efforts of those who have fought for social justice; unlike the founders of SMO studies, however, this next wave of professors sought not only to observe the rhetorical patterns of others, and not only to debunk reigning explanations of the ways things are, but also to contribute parts of a forgotten but usable past for movements in the present. Often understood as projects of both political debunking and historical recovery, this second wave of early social justice scholars tried to produce works that would help readers to reimagine democracy by including forgotten or silenced voices in our national dialogue. This is the essence of what Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1989), Sonja and Karen Foss (1991), Bonnie Dow (1996), and others have tried to do for women's history; what Bryant Alexander (2006), Brenda J. Allen (2004), Kirt Wilson (2002), and others have tried to do for the history of people of color; what Jennifer Wood (2005), Eleanor Novek (2005), Bryan McCann (2007), and others have tried to do for prisoners; what Chuck Morris (2007), James Darsey (1991), Erin Rand (2008), and others have tried to do for queer activists; and what Dale Brashers (with Haas, Neidig, & Rintamaki, 2002), Lisa Keränen (2007), Barbara Walkosz et al. (2008), and others have tried to do for patients in various parts of the health-care system. Such scholarship strives both to deconstruct existing paradigms and to reconstruct the nation as a now more inclusive space of enlightened public discourse.

By busting up the hegemony of Great White Men delivering Great White Speeches before Great White Audiences, this second wave of social justice scholarship not only enriched our understanding of our national history but also—dovetailing with the rise of Cultural Studies, Ethnopoetics, and Performance Studies—changed what kinds of documents we consider as evidence and what modes of analysis we use to address them (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). For example, because their subjects were not generally giving public lectures, scholars of the communicative history of slavery have taught us to look instead for the evidence offered in the posters announcing runaway slaves, in the folk songs they sang in the fields, and in the testimonies they told to their allies (see Hodges & Brown, 1994). Because we tend to use them rather than speak about them, Jeremy Packer (2008) has taught us to study cars, and the political-economy of mobility more broadly, as a way of mapping evolving notions of agency and citizenship. Because her subjects were often silenced in public during the antebellum period, Sue Zaeske (2003) has taught us to look instead to the petitions women activists sent to Congress. Because his subjects were interested less in giving traditional speeches than in staging audacious guerrilla actions in the streets of New York City during the tumultuous 1960s, Darrell Enck-Wanzer (2006) looks to the Young Lord's marches, protest signs, graffiti, and other grassroots means of expression. By seeking to debunk reigning notions of the public good and by expanding the repertoire of who authors its criteria and exemplars, this second wave of social

justice scholars has also enabled us to expand the notions of data and method. No longer confined to speeches or other officially sanctioned means of communication by elites, we now range widely across a dazzling array of cultural artifacts while marshaling multiple modes of analysis, hence producing scholarship more attuned to the lived realities of daily life.

In the SMO scholarship addressed above, professors studied the actions of political groups from a traditional relationship of professional distance, wherein the movements they tackled were seen as data, as objects to be analyzed, and as occasions for producing academic conclusions. In the second wave of social justice scholarship, scholars sought to debunk existing cultural fictions while also diversifying our national dialogues by making claims for the inclusion of new voices in the democratic process; still, the politics of such work were usually only implied, as if the knowledge conveyed in these scholarly articles or books could be used by others whose hands were not tied by the traditional norms of academic objectivity and professional distance. In both stages, academics sought to produce usable information that could be conveyed to others; however, those scholars were still High Priests of Knowledge who, while not speaking as activists in their own right, transferred the necessary skills, tools, and motivation to other actors.

In the third wave of social justice scholarship, we move from an implied politics to an engaged politics, where researchers are no longer studying objects from which they hope to glean some truths to be offered as tools to others; rather, in this third stage, scholars build projects where they are directly implicated in and work alongside disadvantaged communities. No longer pursuing “third-person-perspective studies” that place them above the world looking down, such social justice scholars seek “first-person-perspective studies” that leave them buried in the complexities and contradictions of the communities with whom they work and play (Frey & Carragee, 2007, p. 6). The third and strongest version of social justice work therefore entails scholars who are activists writing about their activism, hence debunking the status quo, reenvisioning the nation, multiplying the number of voices we welcome to the table, and, just as importantly, embodying the courage and commitment required to make a joyful long-term commitment to building social justice. And so the practitioners of this third wave of engaged social justice scholarship approach issues of social justice not only as *sites of research* but also as *callings for engagement* with disadvantaged communities. As Lawrence Frey and his colleagues argued in a seminal 1996 essay on this question, empowering social justice scholarship requires a sensibility that “foregrounds ethical concerns,” that engages in “structural analyses” of the social causes of ethical problems, that “adopts an activist orientation,” and that, as an expression of “solidarity,” “seeks identification with others” (p. 111). For Frey and his team, such work is conducted “not only about but for and in the interests of the people with whom” the research is constructed (p. 117). This is no longer scholarship about the efforts of others, but collaborative work, often ethnographic, about our own efforts to work for social justice (for examples of this kind of scholarship see Adelman & Frey, 1997; Cheney & Lair, 2008; Conguergood, 1994; Hartnett, 1998).

This third wave of engaged social justice scholarship is based less on pie-in-the-sky idealism than on a cold-blooded analysis of the fate of universities in postmodernity. For as the mass-production of consumer goods has shifted to tax-free, environmental-regulations-free, and union-free “development zones” in second- and third-world nations, leaving America’s once-proud industrial cities to crumble around us, so the U.S. economy has become increasingly focused not on manufacturing goods but on disseminating ideas and images. Once a land of giant steel mills, city-sized auto factories, immense dockyards, and innumerable other sites of industrial gigantism, large swaths of the United States have become immersed instead in a networked racetrack of telecommunications, speed-of-light customer services, and dubious investment schemes. Observers have called this an age of post-Fordism, neoliberalism, or casino capitalism; Jodi Dean (2004) refers, instead, to a new age of “communicative capitalism,” hence indicating how the production and circulation of communication—via films, TV, radio, Web sites, and advertising, the whole silky apparatus that teaches the world how to consume ever-increasing piles of junk—has become a driving component of U.S. life (p. 266; see also Hartnett & Stengrim, 2006, pp. 139–211). As scholars embedded in universities that are ever-more powerfully controlled by grants and investments from the same multinational corporations and branches of government driving this new stage of communicative capitalism, we are almost inescapably encased in the needs and interests of power (Bratich, 2008). This means that the choice is no longer between striving for political engagement or seeking the safety of traditional scholarly work, for the Ivory Tower is no longer a place apart from or above the world; rather, it has become a nodal point, a relay station, a seminal site for studying, teaching, living, and enhancing the practices and promises of communicative capitalism. Those who eschew the models of social justice scholarship noted here are therefore making an equally—albeit more traditionally sanctioned—political decision regarding how they will spend their time, for what causes, and in what interests. As Dwight Conquergood (1995) argued, “The choice is no longer between pure and applied research. Instead, we must choose between research that is ‘engaged’ or ‘complicit.’ . . . Our choice is to stand alongside or against domination, but not outside, above, or beyond it” (p. 85).

Although I love the bravado of Conquergood’s (1995) call, we should be clear that postmodern life is marked by the swampy gray areas that lie between engagement and complicity. In my case, for example, are 20 years of working as a teacher inside prisons and jails evidence of a lifelong commitment to empowering the damned, and hence to changing our nation’s addiction to mass incarceration, or are they evidence of my providing social services that put a human face on an unredeemable monster? Back in the early 1990s, at a public gathering in a large auditorium in Chicago, where a bunch of us were talking about teaching in prisons as a form of social justice, we were shouted down by three angry young men who accused us, among other things, of “working for the Man.” For those radical activists (who self-identified as representatives of a local splinter group of Communists, go figure), my work was little more than wishy-washy liberalism; in their eyes, I was complicit with the prison-industrial complex. More recently, at a conference I organized at the University of Illinois in 2004, one of our

sessions tumbled into a heated debate about whether going inside prisons, even in the cause of building solidarity with prisoners, was tantamount to supporting the prison system. Our keynote speaker at that event was Ruthie Gilmore, the noted prison abolitionist; speaking about prison-based activism in general, she cautioned the audience to be careful not to engage in actions that amounted to little more than “tweaking Armageddon” (see also Gilmore, 2007). And so I will confess that on my bad days, when the guards are fuming, or the “call” for class is late, or my students show up to class with more tales of abuse and neglect, or when a student’s parole is denied, it can indeed feel as if teaching communication classes or running poetry workshops in prisons is little more than tweaking Armageddon—our fleeting moments of grace are but a drop of water in the ocean of institutionalized racism, state-sanctioned violence, and public apathy. On better days, of course, the same practices feel full of possibility and joy, as if sharing the gift of language and expression with the damned is a righteous calling, a commitment to try to do something, *anything*, in the face of overwhelming odds. Indeed, when I share an imprisoned student’s poem with her or his proud mother, when someone nods along in agreement as she or he reads one of our little prison-based magazines, or when an auditorium erupts in applause after hearing a prisoner-authored speech or poem protesting the prison-industrial complex and its culture of mandatory racism and violence, I know that we are doing more than just tweaking Armageddon—we are mobilizing cross-racial, cross-generational, and cross-class alliances based on a love of art, community building, and social change (see Hartnett, 2008b, pp. 555–556; and Hartnett, in press). Still, the line between engagement and complicity seems to me less and less clear; there are no easy answers, few safe spaces, only differing shades of interpretation depending on the tenor of each day. I mention my ambiguity to demonstrate that even as the third wave of engaged social justice scholarship follows in Conquergood’s footsteps, we should remind ourselves that engagement and complicity are slippery terms open to multiple readings—they are less clear-cut positions than malleable guidelines.¹⁰

The Dilemmas and Rewards of “Going Public”

In the preceding section of this essay I reviewed what I consider the three main waves of engaged social justice scholarship, and I noted that the practices of this work are complicated and contested. For readers new to this genre of work, I recommend Pete Simonson’s (2010) gorgeous essay in this same journal, wherein he recounts a grueling but also enlivening tour of duty as an Obama campaigner in southwest Texas during the heavily contested Democratic Party primaries in February of 2008 (see also Benson, 1981). The piece merges heady rhetorical theorizing (in a decidedly gentle, *non-theory* wolf mode), gonzo journalism, astute political commentary, and endearing autobiographical confessions, all while expressing a sense of existential thrill. Simonson demonstrates how each day on the campaign trail was a hair-raising, 12-hour immersion in joyful commitment—you don’t pound the streets of Laredo, your arms full of political posters, your words tumbling out in a mixture of English and Spanish, your head spinning with excitement, your safety threatened by local

thugs, if you don't love what you are doing and believe that meaningful change is not only possible but coming fast. For enthusiastic students of the genre, I recommend a weekend spent reading Lawrence Frey and Kevin Carragee's (2007) two-volume *Communication Activism*, an anthology that offers powerful examples of how our colleagues are trying to embody the hopes (and confusions) of engaged social justice scholarship. For those of us who teach, study, write about, and pursue social justice, these two volumes offer a remarkably useful series of theoretical arguments, historical precedents, specific case studies, personal stories, and extensive reading lists (the bibliography to Frey and Carragee's "Introduction" alone makes the books worth purchasing). Still, we should be clear that even an essay as good as Simonson's, or a collection as good as Frey's and Carragee's, will be read within dramatically limited circles: They will likely not reach beyond the academy, and they will barely scratch the surface of our little subfield of communication, let alone speak to historians, anthropologists, philosophers, literary critics, and others. This is not a critique of these works but of the political-economy of niche consumerism, wherein each microscopic subdiscipline has its own journals, conferences, and awards, all of which teach young scholars to think in narrow spaces rather than in grand ways. Hence, if we hope to be relevant beyond our own circle of friends and colleagues, we must—as the title of the conference that spurred this essay asked—"Go Public" (see also Frey, 2009).

The problem, of course, is that "going public" is not easy. At its most fundamental level, to go public means taking scholarship—which is usually densely written, littered with footnotes, full of academic jargon, and produced in long journal articles or books—and translating it into much shorter, reader-friendly, footnote-free, jargon-free, mass-media-shaped tidbits. This translational process is not easy to do, either at the stage of production or at the stage of publicity. Indeed, the best national news and opinion magazines are virtually impregnable cliques of insiders; getting an article placed in *The Nation*, *The New York Review of Books*, or *Harper's*, for example, is little short of a miracle. Radio is a more accessible medium—it is certainly easy enough to work yourself into rotation on your local NPR or pirate radio station, where they are always grateful for insightful local analysts. The biggest splash, of course, is made in the public by appearing on TV, but being on TV, at least for me, is more of a curse than a blessing (to which I will return later). And then there is blogging, a new form of public communication that many scholars seem to think is a kind of community service but which, I am afraid, I see as little more than institutionalized banality. Keep a diary, it is more tasteful. In short, going public is a nice idea but a very finicky process when put into practice.¹¹

Still, heeding the call of social justice scholarship, and recognizing that the success of our activist projects hinges in part on bringing them to the attention of the corporate media, many of us try to go public. Those who hope to do so should be apprised of the following likely results, for if you go public in a manner that challenges those in power, then:

- You will receive vicious hate mail, most of it comic, some of it frightening, but all of it discouraging. Responding to this hate mail will initially prove edifying, until

you realize that you don't have the slightest chance of changing the minds of most of the bigots who are filling your e-mail in-box. When you come to this realization, it will break your heart.

- You will receive intimidating letters from multinational corporations that believe that threatening you with lawsuits will scare you into silence. The local ACLU and other good lawyers will offer to defend you, but you will still lie in bed at night wondering if strange men-in-suits are coming to get you.
- You will find your scholarly work and political events dissected on blogs, usually by people who have not actually read your work or attended the political events in question. This will of course be devastating, for it will demonstrate that the public sphere has little to do with reason and much to do with ranting-and-raving by fools.
- You will, on rare occasions, such as when war breaks out and you oppose it, or when the execution of a prisoner is approaching and you oppose it, find dead animals left on your front porch, waiting there as reminders of what happens to those who dare question the power and majesty of the nation-state and its murderous laws. Your dogs and cats will not mind these minor forms of harassment, but such displays will lead your children to ask hard questions.
- If you should make the mistake of discussing such matters at faculty brown-bag lunches or cocktail parties, some of your colleagues or acquaintances will look at you in strange ways, suggesting with their awkward glances that you have crossed an unspoken line by raising political questions in what are supposed to be occasions reserved for polite, institutional chatter.
- Despite these difficulties, if you choose to go public in print, you will be asked by well-meaning editors to turn your complex sentences into short ones. You will be asked to "cut the historical stuff," for such editors believe that the public has little interest in the past. You will be asked, in short, to write more like a meatcutter than a poet or a scholar.
- If you go on the TV news, you will be asked to speak in clipped phrases that amount to segments no longer than 20 seconds. *Imagine explaining how the legacy of slavery influences the death penalty in 20 seconds.* Nonetheless, if you manage under these circumstances to speak clearly and look authoritative, you will still find yourself embarrassed to find that your segment on the death penalty or the war is followed by advertisements for tires, mouthwash, and retirement accounts, all of which are longer, glossier, and more entertaining than your segment on social justice. For example, to mark the 6-year anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a team of us at the University of Colorado Denver (UCD) staged 2 days of commemorative events in March, 2009; one of our featured components was "Eyes Wide Open," an art installation where 59 pairs of boots, each one honoring a Colorado soldier lost in the Iraq war, and an equal number of pairs of shoes, designating killed Iraqi civilians, were arranged in a pattern on our quadrangle and surrounded with informational placards. The Denver chapter of the American Friends Service Committee (www.afsc.org/denver; thank you Carol); the University of Colorado Denver Communication Department; the UCD Center for Public

Humanities (<http://clas.cudenver.edu/publichumanities/index.html>; thank you Philip); and the local chapter of Iraq Veterans Against the War (<http://ivaw.org/chapter/denver>; thank you Dan), thus worked together to create a public space for personal reflection, political dialogue, and talk of forgiveness. Hundreds of people came to the exhibit, including many veterans and family members of the deceased; it was a stunning day of conversation about war and its costs, complete with some heated debates, many tears, and lots of hugging and exchanging of phone numbers. That night, on the local TV news, our day-long event—so moving, so powerful, so necessary—was trumped by a T-&-A-laced biographical ditty about a cheerleader for the Denver Nuggets.

Going Public therefore entails a series of maneuvers that may feel foreign to most academics: Whereas scholarly production is slow and methodical, going public entails the rapid dissemination of first drafts; whereas academic audiences tend to be respectful and collegial, going public means opening yourself up to a world of Limbaugh-style savagings; whereas professors are accustomed to teaching in settings marked by dignity and lofty social principles, going public means entering the corporate-driven cesspool of mass media—for these and other reasons, going public is indeed a trying course of action, one that can leave you feeling exhausted if not battered.

Still, going public to try to advocate for social justice also leads to any number of wonderful surprises, newfound coalitions, and interpersonal pleasures, including:

- You will receive sweet e-mails from around the world: someone will write from India to say *thank you for opposing the war*; a school boy in China will agree that the death penalty is a nasty affair and ask if you know Shaquille O'Neal; a colleague will write from Dublin to say that her students devoured your last article or book—these e-mails will buoy you for days and fill you with a sense of international solidarity.
- You will discover that your students are particularly excited when they see you on TV, hear you on the radio, or read you in the newspaper, for suddenly you are no longer just another professor but a media figure—and they seem to respect that. Teaching your students how to become media producers is an even sweeter reward. Indeed, helping your students grow into articulate activists and committed scholars is perhaps the best reward of all: When former students write to say that they have completed law school and are joining the United Nations, or have finished a documentary for HBO, or are running a homeless shelter and activism center, and they want to thank you for helping them to change the world, your heart will swell with joy.
- You will find that your colleagues offer encouragement and thanks when you least expect it. Mathematicians will appear at your office door, physicists will stop you on the quad, anthropologists will approach you at the farmers market—and their kind words, thanks, and suggestions will energize you. During the early days of the war in Iraq, I was particularly touched by the number of emeritus professors who wanted to share stories about their efforts during the Vietnam War;

our conversations evolved into a tutorial on U.S. history and an ongoing debate about political tactics, both gifts for which I am grateful.

- Because of these gestures of thanks and solidarity from students, colleagues, and both local and international allies, you will realize that you are immersed in something bigger than yourself, and that will feel like an honor. Indeed, you will find that although you have become a target for yahoos of all stripes, your efforts are often responded to with thanks and interest. Most importantly, your community work will empower others to become better advocates for social justice, and watching them grow into self-possession and confidence will be among your great joys.
- The more time and effort you spend on social justice work, then the more people you will meet who are not professors, lawyers, doctors, or other white-collar elites, thus expanding your social world, making you a more diverse and complicated person who is less judgmental and more patient. In that same vein, working with communities that are truly disadvantaged will teach you to laugh at the petty faculty squabbles that so many of us let consume too much of our time and energy—a little perspective goes a long way.
- You may even, if you do these things for long enough, find that your colleagues decide you might be on to something, and sooner or later you will be asked to give lectures and colloquia, and before long the outsiders doing crazy things will seem more like the new common sense—watching this process take place will be especially gratifying. In fact, if you look around the communication profession, you will notice that Art Bochner, the most recent past-president of the NCA, carries a strong commitment to social justice scholarship; Bryant Alexander is now the associate dean at California State University Los Angeles; Brenda J. Allen is now associate dean at the University of Colorado Denver; Fernando Delgado is now dean at Hamline; John Sloop is now associate dean at Vanderbilt; Dale Brashers is the communication department head at the University of Illinois—the list goes on and on, proving that colleagues who support and/or practice social justice scholarship are running departments and colleges and national organizations. The list of such figures will certainly grow in size and number over the coming years, meaning that the shape of our undergraduate and graduate curricula, our commitments to service and experiential learning, our habits as scholars, our goals as administrators, and our partnerships with local communities are all likely to continue evolving along the lines noted here—in short, engaged social justice scholarship is the future of the field.

The time has come, then, to begin a conversation about what new journals, what new interest groups or divisions within the National Communication Association, what new undergraduate classes and graduate seminars, what new modes of evaluation for promotion, what news means of support for service learning, and what new means of funding are required to help us institutionalize the trend toward communication scholars working for, teaching about, and writing articles and books based on their social justice projects.

Joyful Commitment

I want to begin this final section of the essay by sharing a story about a Jesuit priest I met on a bus ride to a march outside a supermaximum security prison in Indiana back in the early 1990s. He had just returned from a hunger strike outside the White House, where he had hoped to stop the death penalty by drawing attention to the suffering of others by making himself suffer. He lasted many weeks, eventually wasting away to virtually nothing; on the verge of death, his brothers violated his wishes by calling an ambulance to whisk him away to safety. The president never agreed to meet with him, the press largely ignored him, strangers mocked his cause, and he was mugged more than once; on the other hand, he said that each day he received thanks and blessings from supporters and passersby who brought him water, flowers, and warm wishes while engaging in deep conversations—I *have never felt so loved and loving*, he remembered. He was now back on solid food, and as we rode through the farmlands of southwestern Indiana, sharing bagels and apples, I asked him why he did it, basically suggesting that he was crazy. He laughed and then confessed that he knew his actions would not stop the death penalty, but that he nonetheless felt compelled to try—*better to fight and lose*, he said, *than to let them destroy your soul*. What the priest did not say that day, but what his actions in Washington, DC, and his demeanor that day on the march in Indiana, showed me, was that he loved what he was doing: His happiness was not bound up in a heroic narrative of triumphing over Evil, but in the joy of working with fellow activists to try to create a culture where our days are full of community, shared projects, and a sense of purpose and hope rather than resigned consumerism and political cynicism (see also Dailey, 1998; and Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

I thought of that priest the other night while reading Thich Nhat Hanh (2008), the Buddhist monk and antiwar activist, who reminds his readers that “what’s important is not the goal we’re seeking . . . but living each moment of our daily lives truly and fully” (p. 55). The story of the radical priest and the writings of the Buddhist monk teach us the same lesson: Yes, we want to change the world for the better; and yes, we will work diligently to make it so; but no, we are not likely to witness the end of racism, sexism, imperialism or mass incarceration in our lifetime—so the most we can do is to move onward, trying our best to practice *agape*. In her memoir about teaching poetry at San Quentin Prison, Judith Tannenbaum (2000) recounts how there were days when she felt like she was “hurling my body” against “a brick wall,” all while fearing that “my body would certainly be crushed long before even the slightest of dents appeared in the brick wall” (p. 147). Still, the bonds of solidarity built in her workshops, and the many public effects produced by her students’ work, taught her and her imprisoned collaborators that “love was the human gift we had to give, and we did our best to give it” (Tannenbaum, p. 199). Knowing that we, like Tannenbaum, are hurling ourselves against brick walls of various shapes and sizes, we must learn from her lesson to find fulfillment not in the dream of future victories but in the existential thrill of the present. We must, the priest, the monk, and the poet are telling us, find happiness in the friendships and solidarities that we create on such

bus rides, in the laughter of protest marches, and in the glimmers of redemption that flare up in prison classrooms. Working from such spaces of joyful commitment makes us better persuaders by enabling us to turn away from scholarship as critique and rejection toward scholarship as affirmation and empowerment; it protects us against burnout by enabling us to turn away from activism as anger and confrontation toward activism as fulfillment and solidarity; and it makes us better teachers by enabling us to bring into our classes frontline experiences that enrich traditional learning materials.¹²

Consider the long-term political effectiveness, personal resilience, and intellectual contributions of our colleague Professor Robbie Cox, who has served three terms as president of the Sierra Club (www.sierraclub.org) while also playing a leading role in bringing environmental concerns to the forefront of communication studies (Cox, 2006). Or marvel at Professor Robert McChesney, who founded and now leads Free Press (www.freepress.net), one of the nation's leading organizations working to build grassroots media production as an alternative to rotten corporate hucksters, all while writing and editing a series of studies that have transformed how we think about media reform (McChesney, 2004). Revered as master mentors and brilliant organizers, Cox and McChesney have changed the landscape of communication studies not by hectoring us into acquiescing to their arguments but by leading by example, by making it obvious that the intersection of scholarship and activism is an exciting, enriching, wide-open space of intellectual invention and community building.

As one final example of this practice of joyful commitment, consider Phillip K. Tompkins's (2009) *Who is My Neighbor? Communicating and Organizing to End Homelessness*. Communication scholars know Tompkins as a leader in organizational communication, but since his retirement from the University of Colorado Boulder in 1996 he has assumed a new role as an activist working both with and for the homeless in Denver. A religious man, Tompkins hoped in his retired life to find ways to put his spiritual beliefs into practice, and so he began volunteering at Denver's St. Francis Center (www.sfcdenver.org), a shelter for our city's burgeoning homeless population. As Tompkins learned more about the conditions that lead to and sustain homelessness, he became filled with "indignation bordering on outrage" (p. 81), eventually becoming "an ardent abolitionist" (p. 172); and so he dove into the world of social services and community activism, where he eventually played a role in prodding Mayor John Hickenlooper to launch a Commission to End Homelessness Within the Decade (called Denver's Road Home, www.denversroadhome.org). The first lesson of Tompkins's memoir, then, is that by becoming immersed in this particular community problem, *he became radicalized*: The successful professor who once worked for NASA and chaired his department was now cleaning shower stalls, mopping floors, hanging out with homeless folks, and, as a consequence, finding himself ever more deeply committed to constructing practical ways to end homelessness. Simultaneously, Tompkins was learning to respect people whose daily lives are a struggle, including Betsy Anne, who fought through addiction to reclaim her life (pp. 1–5, 12); Joe, who sported a "flattened nose he'd got as a professional pugilist in Los Angeles" (p. 10); and Cadillac, so named because his life-possession-carrying

shopping cart “was the biggest and shiniest” in Denver (p. 31). While Tompkins was radicalized politically, he was also changed interpersonally: The Other now had a face, a story, a life brimming with heartbreak and happiness. Because of these interpersonal and political transformations, Tompkins began to feel a deep sense of solidarity with the St. Francis Center’s staff and clients, for “SFC had become a part of my identity, a ‘we,’ a reference group, a community-of-salvation-in-this-world” (p. 129). Scrubbing toilets by day, advocating for justice at night, enjoying the challenges and thrills of each task, and feeling a growing sense of solidarity and purpose all the while, Tompkins began to embody what he calls “the discipline of compassion” (p. 151): A principled way of offering human services that diminish pain while focusing on interpersonal fulfillment achieved in solidarity with those who share your political goals.

Based on 10 years of work at the shelter, and filled with moments of laughter and recognition, Tompkins’s (2009) book demonstrates how by making a long-term commitment to ending homelessness, he filled his days with joy, built solidarity with those in need, and became politically transformed, personally enriched, and spiritually fulfilled. The fact that Tompkins only wrote this book and engaged in these life-changing experiences *after retiring from the academy* points to how desperately we need to reconsider what it means to be a professor, for our professional norms should not hamper our intellectual curiosity, spiritual growth, and political commitments. Indeed, while studying *Who is My Neighbor?* offers readers an immersion into joyful commitment, it also amplifies Bochner’s question from the introduction to this essay: What is our mission, and how can we transform the academy to enable us to pursue more meaningful lives? In essence, how can we reform the postmodern university so that projects like Tompkins’s come not after our careers but simply *are* our careers?

As I have learned from the Jesuit priest, the Buddhist monk, Tannenbaum’s memoir, Simonson’s campaign road trip, Tompkins’s quest, Cox’s and McChesney’s advocacy, and my own 20 years of work in and against the prison-industrial complex, we can only begin to answer those questions by recognizing that we make our commitments not only to the future but to the present moment, not only to changing the world but to changing ourselves, not only to arguing against something but to believing deeply in something else. “We can proceed, of course, out of grim and angry desperation,” writes the Buddhist philosopher Joanna Macy (2008), “but the tasks proceed more easily and productively with a measure of thankfulness for life” (p. 139). What I am calling joyful commitment amounts, then, to turning the tools of intellectual inquiry and the practices of social justice scholarship and activism into occasions for seeking solidarity and fulfillment with others (see also Foss & Foss, 2009). I am asking us to turn, then, from the model of the isolated genius hammering away at some sliver-thin riddle in a cloistered office to a more community-based, team-building, project-centered mode of action that leaves us immersed in our local dilemmas and face-to-face with our neighbors. By thus pondering how to practice what King (1957) called the power of our “overflowing love,” what Tannenbaum (2000) calls our essential “gift,” and what Tompkins (2009) calls “the discipline of

compassion,” perhaps we can turn away from feeling bound to trying to dispense Truths and toward constructing solidarity while working joyfully for social justice.

Notes

- [1] On the question of prisoners and their educational deficits, see Harlow (2003) and the other documents available from the Bureau of Justice Statistics at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs; for elaborations on the themes discussed in this paragraph, see Hartnett (2008a); on the teaching experiences noted here, see Hartnett (2004); on the communication dimensions of these issues, see PCARE (2007).
- [2] For a representative attempt to try to recuperate the Greeks as models of how to merge pedagogy and citizenship, see Clark (1996); for a grim reminder of just how difficult it will be to fulfill the goals noted here in the wake of the recent market crash, see Delbanco (2009).
- [3] For an extended version of this thesis, developed in a book that says nothing of race, class, labor, gender, war, or the other political travails that make public deliberation so complicated, see Keith (2007); also see Longaker (2007).
- [4] Communication is by no means the only academic discipline embedded in this way, as seen in painful detail in Saunders (1999); in 2002 John P. McHale, now an Assistant Professor of Communication at Illinois State University, released a video that was widely credited with saving the life of Joe Amrine, a wrongfully convicted and sentenced-to-die prisoner in Missouri; for his recounting of the events, see McHale (2007); for another stirring anti-death penalty success story, see McCann, Asenas, Feyh, & Cloud (in press).
- [5] For a counterexample to these claims about how we teach the fundamentals of communication, see Foss & Foss's (1994), *Inviting transformation: Presentational speaking for a changing world*, an undergraduate textbook that seeks to immerse public speaking in other modes of cultural production, explicitly foregrounds marginalized voices as central components for renewing democracy, and encourages students toward tackling pressing political issues.
- [6] Note that I have previously used the latter half of this paragraph in Hartnett & Mercieca (2007).
- [7] Alan Sokal made fun of the conditions I am describing here by sending a ridiculous parody of theory wolf gibberish to *Social Text*, a hotshot journal where his joke was published as if it was serious scholarship—hence proving Sokal's point that mumbo jumbo can be used to dress up an essay with neither an argument nor data (Sokal, 1996a); when the piece was published, Sokal announced his ruse by saying that the article was little more than “a review of left-wing cant, fawning references, grandiose quotations, and outright nonsense” (Sokal, 1996b; for a representative response to the contretemps, see Ehrenreich, 1999).
- [8] For an overview of the larger dilemmas facing universities, see Readings (1996).
- [9] Although this group came to prominence following 9/11, when it attacked those of us who spoke out against President Bush's ill-conceived “War on Terrorism,” the American Council of Trustees and Alumni has engaged in a rabid campaign against the modes of postmodern cynicism addressed here (see the many postings at www.goacta.org); the salient political questions are *How do we counter ACTA's propaganda? How can the communication field argue for social justice while reclaiming the moral high ground from such neoconservatives?* To begin addressing these questions, the National Communication Association Forum sponsored a debate, at the NCA Convention in 2008, between ACTA's president, Anne D. Neal, and Professor Michael Berubé, the noted critic of both ACTA and dogmatic leftists; my thinking in this regard is driven in part by Rorty (1989) and Giroux (1992).
- [10] The magazine mentioned is *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*, a biannual publication of prison-based poetry and art—for our latest issue, Volume 7 (Autumn 2009), follow the

links at <http://communication.cudenver.edu>; regarding the debates mentioned here and the politics of abolition vs. reform, see Meiners (2007).

- [11] For those scholars who want to try to engage in this process of translation, the National Communication Association's online *Communication Currents*, edited by Joane Keyton, offers examples, which are accessible at www.communicationcurrents.com; also see Petronio (1999); for an example of how good blogs can be, see Robert Hariman's and John Lucaites's No Caption Needed blog (www.nocaptionneeded.com), where they chronicle contemporary political life via analyses of images; for a primer on how to translate your scholarship into newspaper-friendly editorials, see Jensen (2005); regarding alternative radio work and the politics of pirate media, see McChesney, Newman, & Scott (2005); I was introduced to the possibilities of alternative radio work via Daniel Larson, the tireless producer of our radio show, "The Social Justice Radio Project," which aired once a week for 2 years on Champaign-Urbana's community-based and nonprofit radio station, WEFT 90.1 FM.
- [12] Along these lines, see the essays by Robin Sohnen, Buzz Alexander, Lori Pompa, and Jonathan Shailor in Hartnett (in press).

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