Citizens Praxis

A PUBLIC EXPERIENCE UNITED WITH A CRITICAL REFLECTION
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“It is only through dialogue that we discover values together-in reflection on concrete life situations.”
-Albert Camus-

Through the power of dialogue I was able to dive deep into the minds, hearts, and souls of the common everyday people. Throughout my praxis I asked questions, posed scenarios, shared pictures, and wasn’t afraid to ask “Why?” Just as Martin Luther King said, “I am not afraid of the word tension”, I too can’t be afraid. I can’t be afraid to raise questions, and provide insight on topics that can sometimes cause tension. This may not be easy- but I am certain it is accomplishable.

“You see things as they are and ask, ‘Why’;
I see things that never were and ask ‘Why not?’”
-George Bernard Shaw-

This is exactly what I did. I challenged the everyday people and their beliefs and values while also trying to make them open their eyes and hearts to ideas that seemed so eccentric to them. My interdisciplinary praxis was held at the site of the Sharon Valley Tavern, located in Sharon, Connecticut. My studies took place over the course of five weeks. I invite you to entertain yourselves. Follow my journey through the eyes of the everyday citizen through my reflective narrative.
THE BEGINNING

March 4th 2011

So today was my first day I seriously contemplated what and where I was going to do my Citizens Praxis project. For days now, I’ve been thinking about where and how I would get the most out of this project. I view this project as an opportunity to really try something new. I think it’s supposed to be more than just community service. I reflect about the issues we’ve discussed thus far in class and I wonder where I should even begin. There are so many things that we’ve talked about in class that strike home. After reading a few excerpts from Soul of a Citizen by Paul Rogat Loeb I understand that anyone can be the culprit of change. It doesn’t take a superhero or a fame to fight for what’s right. I still am unsure of what I want to do for my project. Some ideas, HUNGER--- soup kitchen? SEX SLAVES- shelter for battered and abused women? MEDCINE--- RELIGION---CHILDREN... oh, I haven’t a clue!

March 9th 2011

I just haddddd to write today- because I think I got it figured out!!!! I stayed after class today to talk with my
Professor. I told her that for dayyyyyss now I’ve been trying to figure out what I should do for my project. She seemed genuinely excited to help me figure out how I should go about my project. Since going to Haiti didn’t work out for me, I needed to find another avenue. I told her a little bit about myself and what I was doing with my life right now and she helped me come up with the idea of doing my project right at the Tavern. This totally excites me and I think it will be super beneficial. Not only will I be able to complete my project but I will also get to know my customers a little bit better. So the idea is that I talk to the patrons, talk about the things we’ve talked about in class- Restaviks, hunger, poverty etc and see what their values and beliefs and then dive in a little bit deeper and try and figure out WHY they think the way they do- or how they came to have these beliefs--- should be interesting!
THE SITE: THE SHARON VALLEY TAVERN

The Sharon Valley Tavern has been an integral part of its community for centuries now. Once an office for the Iron Industry in the late 1800’s, the building denotes a lengthy and rich history.
After the iron industry died out in the Valley and the surrounding areas, the building became vacant- the whole area was practically a ghost town, compare to what it was. Shortly after the Prohibition ended in 1933 the building was sold and was opened as a tavern for the remaining local working class men. A few years later the building was purchased by an ancestor of mine. The building and the business has now been passed down through four generations in my family. I am now the current owner and operator and am honored to have this opportunity.

I think it is important to recognize the transformation that the Valley Tavern has gone through. My predecessor happens to have been my father; an individual who had his own style of business and bartending. Unfortunately, back then not everyone was welcomed and it was more of a “Man’s Cave”. When I re-opened, there were still some “old school” patrons and along with some new ones. You’ll see reference to the old school patrons in the story to follow.

It isn’t just the building that makes this place unique; it is of course the people, the common, everyday people. The Tavern has always been the watering hole in the community. It is a place where working men and women can go relax after the days work, have a cold beer, read the newspaper and enjoy the company of others. (Though this wasn’t always the case- because women weren’t always allowed to sit at the bar- or even enter the building). The Tavern caters to the working man and women; as it always has, by keeping beer prices low and welcoming everyone who enters through the door. It is okay to come in after work still in ones work clothes- no judging or pretentiousness here. I think that is one of the many beautiful things about this place--- people feel at home. When people feel comfortable and at home, they will be themselves- and let their thoughts and true inner-self shine, as you will soon see.

PERSPECTIVE

This project was based on real- life situations. Though not mine, the stories and situations that were presented to the patrons of the Sharon Valley Tavern were and have actually happened to someone. Someone(s) being individuals in this world; this world that we all live in. This world in which we all are in someway, somehow inter-connected.
This was my mission: I wanted to know if the common people thought of the world and its inter-connectedness on a daily basis. I wanted to know if they were aware of the issues that were going on in the world. I wanted to know what their vision for the world was in the future and lastly, I wanted to know if they thought of themselves as a person who could help or hinder bringing the world to a better state or place.

The newspapers are purchased daily at the SVT (Sharon Valley Tavern). I suggest to my new bartenders that when they can’t think of anything besides the weather to talk about, simply pick up a newspaper and talk about the front cover. The perspectives for this project came from a series of articles that were published throughout the five weeks that I did my studies in the following newspapers:

The New York Times
NEW YORK POST
NYDailyNews.com
DAILY NEWS
Poughkeepsie Journal

Material that was discussed in class was also brought into the examination. There is an interesting phenomenon that occurs when individuals alter their performance or behavior due to the awareness that they are being observed.¹ I was especially careful not to let this occur. I was certain that if my patrons knew I would be reporting on their values and beliefs that they would alter their cognition.

¹ Heppner (2008).
THE CHARACTERS

-UNCLE THREE-

Uncle Three holds an important role at the SVT. He got his name back in high school because he ran with two other guys (My father and his best friend, whose names all began with the same letter). Growing up on a farm as a devout Irish Catholic he was one of six children. Waking up at three am to go start milking cows was normal, as was going to church every Sunday. Before his parents passed, he bought their land and started a farm stand to sell their crops. He is now the owner of a successful organic farm in the Hudson Valley.

Uncle Three visits the Tavern daily. The people start to wonder if there ever goes a day when he is not there. (Sometimes his business meetings coincide with communal time at the SVT). Although he never stays too long, he certainly takes his time drinking his cold COORS LIGHT poured into a warm glass. Uncle Three is a pillar of the SVT. He reads the newspaper daily, has awareness of the global inter-connectedness when it comes to commerce, and is very much in tune with America and its past, present, and future politics. Everyday when he comes he has something to share. Although he seems a bit shy or timid and may not strike conversation unless spoken too, he has a wealth of knowledge.

March 22nd 2011

So, today was day one of my Praxis project. I’m not exactly quite sure how the remainder of this project is going to go. I feel uncertain. Sometimes I just can’t believe the things that come out of peoples mouths. Uncle Three and I spent the first hour together by ourselves before the next customer came in. I decided not to tell him about the project. I didn’t want him to alter his thoughts just because he was being ‘researched’. I know that he’s a Republican and a very avid one at that so I decided to ask him a question that I knew would
spark his interest. I wanted to know what his viewpoint towards President Obama’s push for united health care was. I had no expectations as to what he was going to say. He shared that as a business owner- he would be responsible for providing health care for all his farm workers, he said it would be nearly impossible to stay in business and provide health care for all his workers. He would have to shut down. In this light, he doesn’t like Obama for pressing the issue. So then I asked him if he thought that in general, if health care should be or is a natural born right. He said yes. Soooooo- this made me think. He doesn’t like Obama, he doesn’t like the idea that he is pushing for united health care, but he DOES think that everyone, and not just in the US is entitled to receive some sort of health care. Well, who is gonna pay for it Uncle Three? Taxes... taxes on the wealthy he says. What about the foreign countries? Who is gonna pay for their health care? He doesn’t know who is going to pay for their health care- he doesn’t think it’s a “right” that they have health care- but someone should take care of it. The conversation was interrupted by my girlfriend Louisa coming into the SVT. Ahhh, perfect timing.
Louisa and I have been friends for a good solid eight years. She is a student at Dutchess Community College and has a bright future ahead of her. She studies Anthropology and has a variety of other skills such as speaking a foreign language, the ability to ride horses in many different ways, and is a very hard worker. In fact, she works for me as bartender sometimes. The patrons love it because she is filled with knowledge and has a very strong belief system and values. On occasion, there have been some heated debates in the Tavern with Louisa where I’ve actually seen people get up and walk away because they got so heated. She means well, and obviously it just means that she has a strong belief system in place.

Louisa, as invited by Uncle Three was immediately involved in the health care conversation. It was interesting to see the generational differences and how they panned out in the conversation. I used her as a crutch to take over the conversation while I just sat nearby; pretending to read the [New York Times](#) as I secretly took notes on what they were saying. Even though Louisa is one of my best friends, I decided to not even tell her about the case study- as I was afraid if she knew that she was being observed- she too might alter her perceptions. I took notes as their conversation evolved, and it turned into a conversation of education. This too was perfect. I wanted to know if they thought education should be free. Louisa getting very elevated about this topic said that she firmly believes America should provide “free” education, because with educated people we will have a stronger nation. But here we go again, WHO is going to pay for it?!?!? It’s easy to say ‘yes, it should be free’ or ‘no, it shouldn’t be free’, but the fact of the matter is that there is nothing that is free in this world and someone is going to have to pay for it. Louisa’s
family travels to France to visit family members there almost every other year. I think that her close relationship with Europe makes her think about things like health care and education in a different light then those who are simply unexposed, like Melon.

-MELON-

Melon belongs to the old school crowd. He used to come in back in the day when my dad ran the place. They call him Melon because he’s got a head the size of a melon! (And some will say he has a brain the size of a peanut). Melon is the typical working class “redneck.” He just barely graduated from high school- in fact the school didn’t want to deal with him or his troublesome brother so they just moved them along. I guess that was okay to do back in the day. Melon likes to drink beer- he could probably out drink any of the other customers. He keeps his composure though- and calls his wife for a ride so that he doesn’t have to drive. I think that’s why most of us like him. Melon is an easily influenced kind of guy. He believes everything he sees on television, most of everything he hears, and probably only half the things he actually sees. With this being said, he comes up with the craziest things. If he saw it on TV, whether it is the Jerry Springer Show or on 60 minutes, he’ll believe it and transfers the information as fact. He’s quite the character.

March 24th 2011

Today was another “Melon-filled-Day”. He spent practically the entire day with me. Ya know, sometimes I wonder if he has killed all his brain cells or not! He comes up with the craziest ideas- and actually and genuinely believes them. I never got to ask him if he goes to church - but maybe he should. So, there are many of the old school crowd that have openly admitted to me that they are still racist. This breaks my heart- but it is reality. I think I’ve done a pretty decent job at making it known that the “nigger” word is not
to be used in my establishment- as it is offensive. The guys like to joke about it- because they know it upsets me- and they like to get me riled up. The only way I know how to react is to get mad at them and show them that it is inappropriate. Some things just can’t be changed. For example, I don’t think Uncle Three will ever NOT be a racist. You won’t believe what Melon said to me today---- I almost feel guilty even putting this on paper- but this project is RAW, UNCut, and UNCENSORED... these are the words of the people. Melon came in all fired up about his day at work today and was complaining that the “Mexicans” weren’t doing their jobs. He announced to the rest of the crowd that he wished he had a few “niggers” because they would have gotten the job done better than the “Mexicans” they had hired. Appalled, my jaw dropped and I caught myself nearly stuttering in saying “WHATTT!?!?” Melon continued, “Yah man, I think everyone should be able to have a few of them” The old school crowd was laughing and rolling in tears because they too can’t believe he’s saying this... but it wasn’t like he was just saying it- he actually meant it- and believed it in his heart. This saddened me that this sort of mentality still exists and it’s right here in my back yard.

-alexander-

Alexander also belongs to the old school crowd- but has nobility. I think I was most shocked about his response to my questions because I didn’t expect a man of his stature to be so naïve when it came to global issues. Alexander once owned a thriving local restaurant until a nasty divorce took everything he owned. Now a day, he seems to have inner hostility towards his passed but he is very much a gentlemen and always treats his friends with respect. He is respected among the community and within the Tavern circle because he is insightful.
“Her mouth might be covered, but she won’t be silenced”

This was the picture associated with an article from the New York Post written by Jennifer Fermino titled “Facing Down a Burqa Ban”. I used this article to entice patrons to fill me in on their perceptions and beliefs. I was shocked at what I found out. The article illustrates a ban that France put into place forbidding Muslims or any other religions to wear these garments. I personally think this is absurd- but before I put my comments out on the table, I wanted to know what the others thought.

April 10th 2011

Tonight at the tavern was one of those nights where my heart was disenchanted. Alexander really surprised me and I wonder if I still have hope that people can change. They say you can never teach an old dog new tricks- but is that really true? I believe that if I can teach, and my father can learn how to use the internet (a generation who isn’t so technically inclined) than yes, old dogs can be taught new tricks. If he can
do it- so can others. Anyway, back to Alexander... There was an article today published in the New York Times about how France put a ban on wearing garments that cover one's face. They say the ban protects two fundamental principles: secularism and the principle of equality between man and woman. 2 Absolutely absurd- ya know what else is absurd- Alexander’s comment. So I showed him the picture and asked him what he thought. He said that people should only be able to wear their religious garments in their own country. I raised the point about America being a melting pot and that our country is a mix of all different religions and ethnicities. He said that if you’re an American- you should dress like an American and only wear your garments on recognized Holidays. I asked what “What exactly is it to dress like an American?” he said “like me and you”. I was astonished that a man such as Alexander would really believe in his heart that we shouldn’t embrace the diverse religions and ethnicities in our own country. I wondered to myself if there really was hope in opening the eyes of these patrons.

-ROLAND-

Roland is another working class citizen who patronizes the SVT nearly everyday. He too went through a nasty divorce and lost all material things he owned. He dwells on his past and can often be pessimistic. He’s saddened by his loss (even though it has been over ten years since him and his ex wife separated) and I believe this influences his mentality today. He’s an old school hippie and loves the Grateful Dead. With that being said he does promote peace, love, and happiness- but simply hasn’t found it within himself yet.

April 12th 2011

Roland came in after work today--- he seemed like he was in a bad mood again. He kinda looked liked he needed a hug- so that’s exactly what I did- I walked up to him and gave him a hug! He seemed quite shocked- I made up an excuse as to why I gave him a hug. I told him it was “National Hug-Out Day”. He accepted this fake holiday I made up and smiled. Later on, after a few drinks he told me he thought that the “National Hug-Out Day” was a good idea. I asked him if he thought it would promote peace in the world. He seemed to believe that it had potential. We got on the discussion of whether or not such a thing had already been invented... he said yes. I researched it, and yes, there is a National Hug Day- its January 21st. isn’t that funny? I asked Roland if he thought that there would ever be peace in the world. He said no, because there will always be evil. I asked “Then how do we go about making the world a more peaceful place?” He walked up to me and gave me a hug. This made me smile, and I wanted to pay it forward. I hugged someone else who sitting right next to me. · I continued to hug every customer who came in tonight. They too liked the idea.

So this was it. This is what I decided to do. Everyday, for the next week I claimed it to be “National Hug-Out Day” and hugged everyone who came in—it had a positive notion, and the regulars knew they were getting a hug if they came in. An excerpt from Soul of a Citizen says “We become human only in the company of other human beings”. I think the relationships that we endure on a daily basis help up discover who we really are. Who we are as individuals, who we are in a communal sense and who we are in a global sense. I think that the patrons of the tavern allowed me to introspect my consciousness and discover a bit more about myself, who I am and
where I am going. I think it’s important to remember that in the company of others we discover the power of people.

Other things that were brought into examination were the topics of:

Every 3.6 seconds a person
dies of hunger

75%
of them are children

CONCLUSION

The concept of ‘transformation of consciousness’ has been around for many years and is an ever evolving one at that. This is an extensive and quite complex field of study so for the purpose of this paper, we will just touch on the basics. The subject can be studied and analyzed from a variety of viewpoints whether it is a religious, psychological, scientific, medical, philosophical, or spiritual perception.

“As you go deeper within yourself, you will find the center, and not only of yourself. It will be the center of the whole existence. At the center we meet, on the periphery we are separate. We are separate only in our bodies, in our minds, but beyond body and mind we are just an ocean of consciousness. There is no 'I am', there is simply pure awareness with no distinctions, no divisions.”

3 http://www.leben-sterben.de/center_transformation_en.htm
Consciousness is a term that has been used to refer to a variety of aspects of the relationship between the mind and the world with which it interacts. This is the foundation of the theory. Transformation can best be illustrated by a caterpillar transforming into a beautiful butterfly. The same type of complete transformation can be done within the consciousness, in a bizarre and mystical way.

The people of the SVT conclusively decided that there could be a shift in consciousness of a suicide bomber- and I agree. They are wired to think the way they do- otherwise known as brainwashed. If that is the case then they can be un-brainwashed. I think this says a lot for the future of the world. If all it takes is a little un-brainwashing, than through the power of speech and dialogue- perhaps there can and will soon be less evil in the world.

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4 (Gulick, 2004)
All the concrete life situations that were discussed through dialogue helped each of us individually; including myself discover values, social transformation, and pure citizenship. Through this Praxis Project I believe I was able to “show the light” to the patrons of the Sharon Valley Tavern just like Socrates did in The Cave. Sometimes people get so caught up in their busy everyday lives they forget their human potential.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

-Margaret Mead-

REFERENCES


   http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness/.