



7-8-2013

I Don't Want to Save Your Children

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Patterson, Katherine M., "I Don't Want to Save Your Children" (2013). *SURGE*. 108.
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I Don't Want to Save Your Children

Abstract

A few weeks ago, the moment that I've been dreaming of for almost half of a year finally arrived. I started the Heston Summer Experience as an intern in Gettysburg. An embarrassing amount of my winter break was devoted to writing and rewriting my applications. After receiving an invitation for an interview, I convened my roommates to help me choose an outfit and ask me practice questions, which is not something I do... ever. Getting my acceptance letter in the mail was the ultimate highlight of a long and difficult year. When I was home for the first few weeks of summer and people were asking me about my plans, I was initially really excited to share. (Who wouldn't be?) The more time I spent explaining the internship to my friends and family though, the more embarrassed I became. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, sexuality, education, migrant workers, summer school, Heston Summer Experience, internships, teaching aide

Disciplines

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Child Psychology | Education | Educational Sociology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](http://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

I DON'T WANT TO SAVE YOUR CHILDREN

July 8, 2013

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convened my roommates to help me choose an outfit and ask me practice questions, which is not something I do...ever. Getting my acceptance letter in the mail was the ultimate highlight of a long and difficult year. When I was home for the first few weeks of summer and people were asking me about my plans, I was initially really excited to share. (Who wouldn't be?) The more time I spent explaining the internship to my friends and family though, the more embarrassed I became.

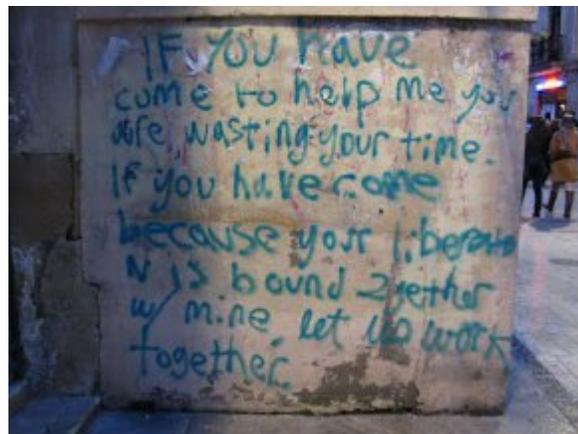
Not the reaction you were expecting?

Let's be clear. It's not the internship itself that I was embarrassed about. I knew it would be a fantastic experience, and so far it has lived up to all of my expectations. What made me so hesitant was how others perceived my internship and my reasons for applying to it.

Normally when you tell people that you've received an internship, the response is something along the lines of "Oh that will be such a wonderful experience. You'll learn so much!" When I explained that I would be a teacher's aide at the [LIU Summer School of Excellence](#) (for children who often switch schools several times a year because their parents are migrant workers), the response I got was much closer to "Oh wow. I'm sure you'll really be helping them. You're doing such great work!"

I wish I could say that I was flattered by the number of people in my life who seemed to have so much faith in my as yet untested teaching abilities, but I doubt that this was the real reason for their response. I'm an inexperienced intern with an opportunity to work in a school full of voluntary students alongside teachers with multiple degrees and several years of classroom experience. When I said I was working with *migrant* children though, all of that went away. In the minds of my family and friends, I went from lucky intern to savior of poor, underprivileged children everywhere.

As much as it annoyed me, I can see why they would make that assumption. So much of the public discourse surrounding both national and international development portrays it as an attempt to graciously extend our



services to the poor and disenfranchised. Even well-respected organizations who unquestionably do important work use language suggesting that their mission is to *save* others. People (myself included) often get carried away by reciting stories of holiday donations and week-long trips to build and repair houses or volunteer with underprivileged youth. We become so focused on our ability to provide public service that we [completely overlook](#) the fact that those with whom we work might be able to offer us something useful in return.

This entire approach is one of the foremost barriers to achieving the freedom, justice, equality, and other [basic human rights](#) that are the very essence of community development in all of its contexts. It suggests an institutionalized sense of superiority in those who aim to “help” marginalized individuals. ***How can we ever hope to create equality though if we begin our efforts with the assumption that we’re already better than those with whom we’re supposed to be partners?***

This attitude provides a convenient excuse to avoid examining the most significant source of social injustice: the fact that there are (average) people in positions of relative power who perpetuate racism, sexism, classism (and any other *-isms* that you want to throw into the mix.) No person should be subjected to poverty or discrimination. Many people are though, and one of the biggest reasons for that is the rest of society. Those who have the privilege of participating in the dominant culture perpetuate inequality by maintaining power through economic or educational marginalization, discriminatory laws, cultural practices – even the language we use or our everyday [microaggressions](#) that communicate hostility, whether intentionally or unintentionally. We like to think that only the organizations on the Southern Poverty Law Center’s [hate map](#) are harmful, but as Martin Luther King told us 50 years ago in his [Letter from Birmingham Jail](#), “the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the [White Citizen’s Council](#) or the [Ku Klux Klanner](#), but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”

A real approach to creating change is not relying on the spasmodic good will of those in the majority to start up summer schools and place large orders of mosquito nets. Instead, it is addressing the aspects of the dominant culture that maintain an unequal status quo. This is where real economic, social and environmental justice come in. Community change should be about engaging *all* people of a community – whether that is locally, nationally, or even globally. It should mean working together not to “save” those who have fallen on hard times but to create a society in which everyone is equal and diversity is viewed as a benefit rather than a threat. On a personal level, it means that we need to step out of our comfort zones to acknowledge *and believe* the viewpoints of those people whose differ from us in gender, age, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, class, neighborhood, city, and parts of the globe. It means undergoing the difficult process of examining our own privilege, recognizing deep-seated biases, learning how our behaviors hurt others and then adjusting our attitudes and actions to shift power. While doing this can be frustrating and extremely uncomfortable, the result is a new level of understanding that is transformative.

When my family and friends at home complimented me on the “great work” that I’m doing this summer, what I should have said was this: If I were interested in saving people, there definitely would have been easier and more lucrative ways to do so. I could have trained to become a lifeguard for example. If my real goal was to be able to pat myself on the back while failing to make any real accomplishments, I could have simply driven to Target and purchased one of those loofahs with the [long plastic arm](#). What I am interested in is shifting power dynamics so that *everyone* can change *and* effect change. By working at the LIU this summer, I’m hoping that I and the students and teachers that I am working with will learn from one another how better to accomplish this.

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<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/07/08/i-dont-want-to-save-your-children/>