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Not a single note was played

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On October 24, 2006, Roger Williams University was visited by a rock star. Bob Geldof came to campus as a featured guest in the Civil Discourse Lecture Series to speak of his efforts on behalf of famine relief for the continent of Africa and to share his many experiences as a result of those efforts. I went to the presentation for a variety of reasons: first, as co-editor of Reason & Respect and a strong believer in the worth of the President's many initiatives with regard to civility and civil discourse on campus, there was a natural sense of interest. Second, Bob Geldof was a rock star for God's sakes, and it isn't every day that a rock star makes a campus appearance, whether that campus is in Bristol, Rhode Island or anywhere else. And third, Geldof came to speak about service to his fellow humans, and the theme of this edition of Reason & Respect is about service and service learning. I left the lecture with an almost staggering series of emotions and impressions that I will attempt to share in the course of this brief essay.

Perhaps foremost (and perhaps I haven't mentioned this) Geldof was a rock star! We toss that phrase around some today, and almost always inappropriately. I'm using it here repeatedly to make a point (I hope) that Geldof really was and, more importantly, really IS a rock star! Perhaps the days of the Boomtown Rats have passed, as Geldof himself self-deprecatingly mentioned during his speech as he acknowledged without sorrow or self-pity that bands come and go and his band had had its time in the sun, and it was only appropriate that they fade into the background. That was the only time in which Geldof and fading into the background should ever be used in the same sentence. Geldof has been at the forefront of famine relief and at the forefront of perhaps the single greatest "service" effort in global history. He was here... on campus, and I left believing not only that I'd met the former lead of the Boomtown Rats, but I'd been in the company, however briefly, of a truly great man.

There is an ongoing commitment to service at RWU, and under the direction of KC Ferrara, that commitment continues to make an imprint upon the RWU community. Our students do good works, our faculty, staff, and administration contribute to a cadre of worthwhile causes, but our commitment to service in the global community pales in comparison to the commitment shown by Mr. Geldof. I can still hear the intensity in Geldof's words when he uttered the phrase, "The idea that a person could be less than another was implausible."

Geldof brought passion and intensity to his words... but many can likely do that. What differentiated Geldof was a remarkable combination of personal attributes that very few, indeed remarkably few people truly have, and that was a combination of passion and intelligence. How many of us see terrible things before us, globally certainly, and sometimes even locally, and do little to nothing about it? I must confess that I certainly have seen my share of horrific things (if only from afar and if only on the television), but I certainly haven't stepped up and done anything about them. That's why I'm no Bob Geldof, and I presume, many of us who left the lecture that evening surely felt the same way... we're no Bob Geldof. Well, maybe it's time for somebody reading this to make a better effort toward being more like Mr. Geldof. He referred to his youth growing up in Ireland as an existence in a "culture of claustrophobia," and I wonder how many of us feel the same way when our creative energies feel tapped and our ability to engage ourselves fully into our surroundings and our world seems simply like too much effort, with too little reward.

Aristotle believed that we humans have a sense of the just and the unjust. That sense, in part instinct, makes us a whole, or a "polis"... a common understanding of people. Aristotle believed it, many of us still believe it and even talk about it, but Bob Geldof actually acted on his better instincts and his sense of justice. While Geldof's speech was peppered with several personal anecdotes, adding flavor to what was a very meaningful and passionate plea to everyone and anyone listening to commit themselves to something bigger than themselves, one particular anecdote effectively and symbolically spoke of his commitment to famine relief. One evening, sitting on the couch while watching a BBC news program, in which he vividly described the scene of his wife on one side and his small daughter on the other, Geldof was overcome with a need to address the human suffering depicted before him. "Enraged and ashamed" were the adjectives Geldof
used to describe his emotions as he watched the television. Out of those feelings was born an idea and a desire
to effect positive change. Geldof, perhaps as much as any single human being, acted on his better instincts,
used his significant creative abilities, and quite literally got off the couch and went out to make the world a
better place.

Many of us see horrible things on the evening news, yet very few of us commit ourselves to making
things better, as we are, after all, busy people. Geldof is a busy man, who seemingly couldn't stand the idleness
that was engulfing him as his musical career was slowing down. While many celebrities spend significant time
“reinventing” themselves, Geldof has devoted the better portion of his life to “reinventing” the world, and he
has committed himself to bettering the whole. Aristotle would have been proud. Geldof told us that ideas and
leadership stemming from ideas are largely circumstantial, created by the circumstances of our lives. His own
circumstances in which he found himself concerned about how he was now going to make a living so paled in
comparison to the images he viewed on the news that any self-pity he may have been harboring was set adrift
in a new and profound sea of commitment to a cause much larger than his own.

It might be naïve of us to assume that that scene so vividly described by Geldof in itself sent him out
into the streets to gather his colleagues and begin a new life-long journey of learning and commitment, but
surely, his life experiences and prior beliefs in social justice and a need to alleviate human suffering were crys-
tallized by that moment. If a journey of a thousand miles truly does begin with one step, then the moment
Bob Geldof got off of that couch and went out into the streets of London was a moment in which one step
was taken on a journey of commitment and service that must surely humble even the most giving among us.

As I sat in the audience that day, I was humbled by my own laziness, and my own commitment to
myself and my own interests in the face of tremendous human suffering. Geldof got off the couch, gathered
many influential friends and began making music to raise money for famine relief. Beyond using his creativ-
ity, he had to use his intellect to navigate some pretty treacherous political waters in order to get relief to the
people who needed it and away from the various cartels bent on maximizing their power and influence with
little to no regard to the suffering of others. One had to leave that lecture feeling as though Geldof combined
intellect, personality, determination, and commitment that made him not only the perfect leader of this
humanitarian effort, but perhaps the only person with that combination of abilities who could truly make a
heroic effort as real and meaningful as it surely was symbolic. His discussion of some of the intricacies involv-
ing various subsidies, tariffs, cartels, and his work with various world leaders to break up these cartels, and lift
various tariffs, in order to get relief to where it needed to go spoke of his intellectual gifts and his ability to
channel his passion and commitment in a most positive manner.

Would we get off our own couches and really do something to contribute to service beyond the sim-
ple things expected of us? Would we truly do something more and go beyond whatever present level of service
where each of us resides? Perhaps we cannot all be Bob Geldof, and there is no doubt that his celebrity status
and his own powerful and vibrant personality garner attention that we perhaps cannot. Perhaps he has friends
with a bit more clout and his social circle is a bit broader than yours and mine. Still, we can all do something
more than we presently are, and perhaps Mr. Geldof’s greatest gift to this university was in his very loud and
powerful message to commit ourselves to something greater than ourselves. That is, there should be no doubt
what a university should be doing anyway, and we all should hope that Geldof’s visit to our campus reinforces
a commitment to service and doubles and redoubles our collective and individual commitments to each other,
and to our world.

In our increasingly interdependent world, we have seen the terrifying power of
individuals to do great harm (Clinton, 2006, p. 50).

Indeed, and particularly after September 11, 2001, we are all aware of the truth of former President
Clinton’s words. What Roger Williams University community members witnessed on October 24th was the
gratifying acknowledgment in person and on stage that individuals can also do great things. The RWU com-

References

Geldof, B. (2006, October 24). Civil Discourse Lecture Series, Roger Williams University,
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