

Stornton Thomas Lynch Junr Joseph Hewes, Wm. Miller
Roger Sherman Saml Lewis Jos Wickersham
Abra Clark Josiah Bartlett Saml Adams
Adams Robt Treat Paine Arthur Middleton Tho' Mifflin
John Penn Lewis Morris Steph. Hopkins
Gerry Geoffreyer Gedread Charles
James Wilson Wm. Byrd Geo. Ross
Franklin John Hancock
John Norton George Wythe Richard Henry
Francis Pickens Lee Carter Vassett
Wm. Paterson James Chaoy

SOIL

Declaration

A Reading of the

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

in Defense of Equality

DANIELLE ALLEN

NIGHT TEACHING



FOR EXACTLY A DECADE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, I TAUGHT by day some of the nation's most elite students—many with tousled hair, often rolling from their dorm room beds right into class, one even showing up casually in his boxer shorts. By night I taught adult students who were without jobs or working two jobs or stuck in dead-end part-time jobs, while nearly always also juggling children's school schedules, undependable daycare arrangements, and a snarled city bus service. They should have seemed bone tired when they arrived at class, but they pulsed with energy.

I taught both groups the same books—by Plato, Sophocles, Toni Morrison. We met in the same rooms—sometimes wood-paneled neo-Gothic chambers that heightened for both sets of students the sense of occasion for our conversations; sometimes in the nondescript, fluorescent-lit boxes of mid-twentieth-century collegiate campus architecture. Yet there, too, the conversation itself, by the end of our two hours, would inevitably generate the feeling that something meaningful had transpired.

In afternoons our heated talk kept traffic noise at bay. On winter evenings our small but ever warmer circle of light rolled back the deepening dark. In both circles, we were making worlds: naming life's constitutive events, clarifying our principles, and testing against one another's wits our accounts of what was happening around us.

Yet if you had peeked in on us, what would you have seen? By and large all we were doing was reading texts closely, and discussing them.

We scrutinized single words. When Antigone, in Sophocles's play from fifth-century Athens, decides to stand up to King Creon and bury her brother, the chorus describes her as making laws for herself. She is autonomous, they say, which is simply Greek for "making your own laws." This is the first instance of the word "autonomy" in written literature. What does it mean? Is Antigone's autonomy a good or a bad thing? My day students wanted to know what it meant for Antigone, as a woman, to stand up for herself in the male-dominated world of ancient Greece. My night students wanted to know whether Antigone's courage was something they could learn from to stand up for themselves, for instance, with their bosses.

We engaged such mysteries as what Shakespeare means in Sonnet 94 when he writes,

They that have the power to hurt and will do none,

They are the lords and owners of their faces.

How does restraint in the use of one's powers lead to the preservation of one's best self? Neither my day nor my night students felt they had much power, yet my day students had some instinctive sense that, to quote the sonnet again, they might well one day "inherit heaven's graces." My night students were more likely to have seen how power corrupts.

Then there was this mystery: does Toni Morrison want us to believe in the ghosts in *Beloved*? Does she want us to believe there are ghosts in our own worlds? Or are they merely symbols? My night students' lives overran with death—from gunshots and overdoses and chronic disease and battery. They were indeed haunted. My day students, many of them well-heeled and all of them well-insured, were still mostly too young to understand what it means to carry the past around within you.

We listened to music. Again to another Shakespeare sonnet:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang

*Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.*

Or Sarah Vaughan singing Rodgers and Hart's "It Never Entered My Mind."* Both groups recognized the musicality in sonnet as well as song, but they brought very different reference points to bear in explaining that musicality. The two groups of students were, I found, experts at different kinds of things.

From my students, I also had much to learn, as teachers often do. They showed me things that I had never seen in texts that I thought I knew so well, as when one of my day students pointed out that the biblical story of the warrior Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter is used by several of the most important political philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to talk about the founding of nations. Jephthah had sworn to God that, if God gave him victory, he would sacrifice the first thing he saw upon his return home. And his daughter ran out to greet him.

My students also taught me things about learning that I had never known, as when one of my night students, after months of mediocre performances, turned in an essay that was light-years beyond what she had been able to do just a week earlier. From then on her performance remained consistently on that new and suddenly exalted level. To this day, I have no idea what flipped the switch. Now I know that I cannot predict individual learning trajectories and that such inexplicable improvements are among the most fundamental mysteries of human life.

Yet the single most transformative experience I had came from teaching the Declaration of Independence not to my bright-eyed undergraduates but to my life-tested night students. I sometimes taught it as part of the U.S. history unit, sometimes as part of the literature unit, and sometimes as part of the writing unit. Like the huge majority of Americans, few of my day students had ever read its 1,337 words from start to finish. None of my night students had.

I started teaching the text instrumentally. That is, I thought it would be useful. These students with jobs were busy. The Declaration is short. No one would complain about the reading. I could use it to teach history, writing, or political philosophy. And so I began.

* I had hoped to provide you four lines from this song from the 1940 musical *Higher and Higher*, but the permissions charges were exorbitant.

My night students generally entered into the text thinking of it as something that did not belong to them. It represented instead institutions and power, everything that solidified a world that had, as life had turned out, delivered them so much grief, so much to overcome.

As I worked my way through the text with those students, I realized for the first time in my own life that the Declaration makes a coherent philosophical argument. In particular, it makes an argument about political equality. If the pattern of books published on the Declaration is any indication, we have developed the habit of thinking about the Declaration mainly as an event, an episode in the dramatic unfolding of the American Revolution. But it makes a cogent philosophical case for political equality, a case that democratic citizens desperately need to understand.

What exactly is political equality?

The purpose of democracy is to empower individual citizens and give them sufficient control over their lives to protect themselves from domination. In their ideal form, democracies empower each and all such that none can dominate any of the others, nor any one group, another group of citizens.

Political equality is not, however, merely freedom from domination. The best way to avoid being dominated is to help build the world in which one lives—to help, like an architect, determine its pattern and structure. The point of political equality is not merely to secure spaces free from domination but also to engage all members of a community equally in the work of creating and constantly re-creating that community. Political equality is equal political empowerment.

Ideally, if political equality exists, citizens become co-creators of their shared world. Freedom from domination and the opportunity for co-creation maximize the space available for individual and collective flourishing.

The assertion that the Declaration is about such a rich notion of political equality will provoke skepticism. Is it not about freedom? The text, after all, declares *independence*.

The Declaration starts and finishes, however, with equality. In the first sentence, the Continental Congress proclaims that the time has come for the people, which they now constitute, to take a “separate and equal” place among the powers of the earth. The last sentence of the Declaration finds the members of the Continental Congress, as representatives

of their newly designated “states,” “mutually” pledging to each other their lives, their property, and their sacred honor. They stake their claim to independence—to freedom—on the bedrock of an egalitarian commitment to one another. Only on the basis of a community built with their equality can they achieve their freedom.

And, of course, there is also the all-important second sentence, which begins, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

As my night students metabolized the philosophical argument and rhetorical art of the Declaration, many of them, and I along with them, experienced a personal metamorphosis. They found themselves suddenly as political beings, with a consciousness that had previously eluded them. They built a foundation from which to assess the state of their political world. They gained a vocabulary and rhetorical techniques for arguing about it.

In reading the document with me, my students in fact re-gifted to me a text that should have been mine all along. They gave me again the Declaration’s ideals—equality and freedom—and the power of its language. They restored to me *my* patrimony as well as their own, and ours.