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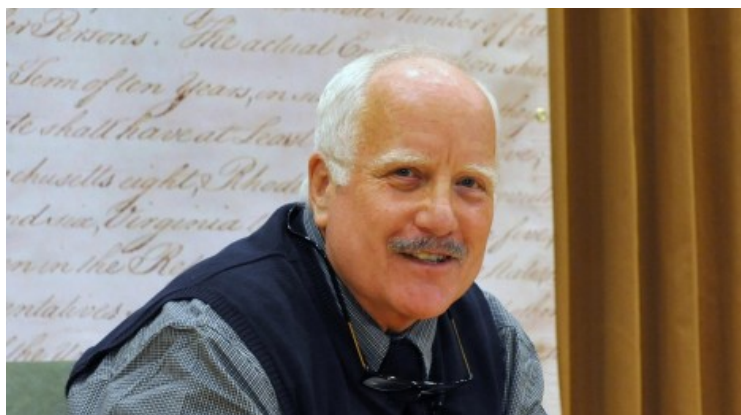
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RICHARD DREYFUSS WANTS TO REVIVE CIVIC EDUCATION – INTERVIEW

July 16, 2015 · by Bailey McCann · in Civic Engagement, Education, Featured, Policy, Social Issues · [Edit](#)

Most people know Richard Dreyfuss as an Oscar-winning actor, but he also has a passion for civics and civics education. Dreyfuss has developed and launched [the Dreyfuss Initiative](#), which is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that aims to revive the teaching of civics in American public education. The Dreyfuss Initiative provides tools for the support of a civics curriculum in K-12, as well as ideas for the advancement of civic thought throughout adulthood. Mr. Dreyfuss spoke with *CivSource* about his ideas in a wide-ranging interview presented below.

BM: What made you decide to launch the Dreyfuss Initiative?

RD: I first started thinking about it during the Bush/Gore election, and all of my friends in Hollywood were saying, “we have to get Bush. We have to impeach Bush,” and I said it’s not

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about Bush – it’s about us. We have no knowledge anymore of how to run the country and who all the players are.

Changing it is going to take 20 years. I’ve always been very calm and relaxed about that. This is going to take 20 years, because what I have to do is raise what is a non-issue and make it an urgent issue. It’s what doctors call an invisible killer – like hypertension. You can’t just make people understand that civic authority is going to be what gives you musculature in being American, or in a fight against ISIS let’s say, but in fact it does. You just have to keep at it and make people understand it in different ways. Right now we have no knowledge of our value system. We wrenched history from one thing to another. That is something that our kids take no pride in because they don’t know it. You don’t have sovereignty of the people if no one tells you that you have it.

BM: How do we get civics back into the curriculum?

RD: I think that the one way to do it is to remind the states that education is not just under the purview of the federal government. There was a reason for the way the curriculum was designed before even though no

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one mentioned it. English literature, sewing, shop, all of those things reinforced notions of the ability to achieve agility of the mind. The biggest error that has happened in the last 30 years is that people began to think about getting a 4.0. That’s not the goal of education. The goal of education is to develop mobility of the mind so that people can be light on their intellectual feet, and handle whatever life throws at them because life is not always pro-American. Our children need to know how to run the country and connect the dots. If you can’t connect the dots, you can’t see the future or see what has been lost.

I can tell you that what’s been lost in the past 30 years are very fundamental things. We’ve lost the concept of preparation and the concept of consequence. Very realistically, we’ve lost time. The element of time is no longer a factor in decision making. We no longer ruminate or contemplate because the momentum of technology demands speed. We have to reclaim time.

In terms of education, we need to understand two core issues: how to think with clarity, and to learn the values of the Enlightenment, which underpin the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. We have to learn it now since so many other countries deny the values of the Enlightenment.

BM: It would seem that teaching critical thinking and Enlightenment values run counter to the current incentives and interests of those in power. How would you work around that?

RD: People only know toxic partisanship, and that's all they know. That's why I say my approach is pre-partisan. It's what Washington envisioned, not the factions that came about with Jefferson. We have to be able to express in real terms what we mean when we say we are American and share American values. There has to be a foundation that every American stands on, and then they can disagree with each other to their heart's content. But we have to agree on the core values of due process, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the ideas outlined in the Constitution.

BM: While the values of the Enlightenment are important and admirable, women and people of color were originally left out, given other realities of the time beyond the Constitutional Convention. How do you approach inclusion?

Anyone who thinks that women can be denied the vote, or black people can be denied citizenship because it wasn't in the original intent is not reading the Preamble.

RD: When people go to original intent, that is an indefensible theory. Original intent is a dead letter, and it makes the Constitution a dead letter. The Constitution is reflective of man at his most realistic. It was meant to grow to include women and people of color, the only thing it asks is that

individuals ally themselves with specific values. Anyone who thinks that women can be denied the vote, or black people can be denied citizenship because it wasn't in the original intent is not reading the Preamble.

BM: What about those of us who are a little beyond K-12 in

age? What makes up the model citizen?

RD: The culture has to breathe these values, we can't just leave them behind in school. In addition to the curriculum, there are three projects I am putting together. The first one is a play competition among all of the regional theaters in the US. If an artistic director thinks a play can make money and includes it in the season, it will qualify for the competition if it is in some way about America. We need plays that are open to all – not just professional writers – and tell stories of America. Those stories can be amplified by turning a play into a movie, or putting it on television. We already have ample proof that can happen, and that is when Arthur Miller wrote three plays that defined postwar America. I want to pick a winner each year and give the winner a MacArthur size prize. I think this is the best way of saying we share something here, we aren't so toxic and in the mode of enemies that we can't find something to share.

I also want to network presidential libraries so that when people visit them they can see debates between opposing views.

Finally, America used to be the favorite subject of Americans and now history classes are so pushed in terms of what they have to cover, everything gets glossed over. I want to create civic clubs outside of the schools, for anyone of any age who has a passion about American history.

BM: How will you create interest in that type of club?

RD: There used to be an old joke about clubs like Kiwanis – “in America you can always be president of something.” What they meant were clubs like the Elks and Kiwanis, and so on. In a Rube Goldberg kind of way, these clubs were part of the foundation of society. They gave philanthropically; they were available in times of crisis, but over time they became a kind of joke – until Katrina. During Katrina, I was in Europe and Europeans were asking me how we could just abandon a municipality like that. We've been in this accelerated decay for a long time. You have to bring citizens together around ideas. We don't have any sense of history past our own childhood.

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the idea of civics*

it wasn't just warehousing them – but it is now. Parents don't trust the idea of civics because the democratic ones think their kids are going to go to school and come out republican, and republicans think that their kids are going to come out democrats. The fact is, what you're going to come out with is America.

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The central point of American anxiety right now is that all of the verities have been removed. There's nothing that connects us. No one is responsible. It's not just Katrina, it's also how we just go to 'let the buyer beware.' We aren't taught to demand accountability. If you don't know you can demand it, you won't. That's exactly what all of the villains count on. What the system allows for is to teach students how to be citizens, which means learning that they have the right to demand accountability and that there are common values that we all share as Americans.



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