

Overview

by *Mary Ellen Flannery*

Of course I think you should read every word on the pages of this 29th volume of *Thought & Action*. But let me suggest just these few for starters: “Hope [is] physical and visceral—like a muscle. It [is] something you *do*,” writes Mike Gecan, longtime organizer for the Industrial Areas Foundation, Saul Alinsky’s old turf.

Are you doing it?

Are you hoping for a system of public higher education that, as author Susan Meisenhelder so thoughtfully proposes in these pages, “involve[s] helping students become active participants in all aspects of their society?” Or a system that, as Toni Morrison offered many years ago, “takes seriously its role as guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices.” Or a system that, as the review panelists of this journal so artfully asked in this journal’s special focus section, serves “students, faculty, and the common good?”

Speaking of Alinsky, which I was, sort of, above, I recently read his 1972 interview with *Playboy* magazine, in which he describes his plans to organize the white middle class of America—“for the simple reason that this is where the real power lies.” (Hm. Not so sure that’s true anymore. Keep in mind Alinsky died before Bill Gates won a driver’s license.) He goes on to say: “They’ve worked all their lives to get their own little house in the suburbs, their color TV, their two cars, and now the good life seems to have turned to ashes in their mouths...They’re alienated, depersonalized, without any feeling of participation in the political process, and they feel rejected and hopeless.

“Believe me, this is good organizing material,” he added.

Could the same be said of the readers of *Thought & Action*? Many of you have worked all your lives to achieve tenure, shared governance, and academic freedom on your campuses. Meanwhile, more and more faculty employment has become contingent, “erod[ing] the quality and accessibility of public higher education,”

notes *Thought & Action* author Gary Rhoades. At the same time, the practice of shared governance looks to be going the way of cool summer nights. (See Bill Rosenthal and Emily Schnee's article about the New Community College for a chilling tale on the subject of shared governance.) And don't forget your students: last year, the collective load of student debt in this country topped a whopping trillion dollars.

Is this "good organizing material" on your campus? Good god, I hope so! So take another look at Gecan: "As real as these pressures are and as overwhelming as they can seem," he writes, "they can be faced—and reduced or reversed—by well-organized people who know how to play a better brand of defense in the public arena, but who also develop a creative and productive offense."

As always, there's plenty to think about in this issue of *Thought & Action*, but there also is plenty to act upon, to knead into that kind of creative and productive offense. In her must-read article on MOOCs, Meisenhelder correctly points out faculty voices have been largely missing from the conversation. Learn how to get heard. Do the research, engage local communities, and have honest discussions with your own administration, urges author Bob Golden, the man who prophesies a day when staff is outsourced to Nigeria. (Not such a fanciful thought!) Activate your students, like author Maureen Curtin, who describes her use of storytelling to promote debate and create "a space for belief and the possibility of solidarity." And somebody, please undertake the three "disruptive innovations" proposed by Rhoades for adjunct or contingent faculty—and then report back!

The late poet Seamus Heaney also has been much on my mind lately. (Between Alinsky and Heaney, there's not room for much else...) Make a cup of milky tea and settle in with this, from his poem "The Cure At Troy":

*History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.*

Be hopeful. 

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