

## ***We're Gonna Roll the Movement On***

### **Soul of a Citizen: Living With Conviction in a Cynical Time**

by Paul Rogat Loeb  
New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999.

*Reviewed by Kathleen Maas Weigert*

**W**e have two daughters in what many call "Gen X," the generation born between 1965 and 1976. Watching them and their friends struggle with issues of relationships and careers, of balance between the private and public arenas, of tensions between the socio-economic and religio-spiritual, has made me aware of the challenges their generation faces.

Some of these challenges match the challenges every generation faces, but some are dramatically different, because the times are different.

Given this, I find myself wondering what my generation, and even earlier generations, can offer in terms of advice. Where is inspiration and hope? How do I encourage Gen X young people to get involved in the life of their times?

I thought about these issues when I began to read Paul Rogat Loeb's insightful new book, *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time*. Here is a book that can help older and younger generations come together around the common themes embedded in the hard work of making positive social change.

For individuals in my generation and those older, especially those who have withdrawn from

the public arena, this book is a reminder of the idealism that compelled us to action when we were twenty-something. For the next generations, Loeb's work is a call to get involved in ways that are both realistic and idealistic, that balance private and public needs, that encourage small steps that can lead to great impacts.

Early in the book, Loeb invites the reader to reconnect "with our fellow human beings, and with our wisest and most humane instincts, and with the core of who we are, which we call our soul."

The word "soul" usually connotes the spiritual and religious, but Loeb uses it in the public arena as well, arguing that "public participation is the very soul of democratic citizenship."

His purpose is straightforward, if not simple: to convince the reader "that our most serious problems, both the public ones and those that seem most personal, are in large part common problems, which can be solved only through common efforts. The dream of private sanctuary is an illusion. It erodes our souls by eroding our sense of larger connections."

Nowadays, when words and ideas belonging to the spiritual vocabulary seem to have been captured by those typically found on

the conservative end of the political spectrum, it is refreshing to find someone on the progressive end articulate in such a striking way that “soul-talk” belongs to all of us.

Loeb’s religious words—soul, compassion, hope, and faith—stand by themselves, of course, and importantly so. But they also fit into an implicit theory of social change that Loeb is presenting.

Let’s start with some stories, since it’s through stories that Loeb puts flesh on his theory. He tells us about “ordinary” folk who find themselves becoming involved in larger issues, often because of a personal encounter with a neighbor’s plight or because something they hold dear is threatened.

There is Virginia, who was impelled to get involved in her community when her elderly neighbor needlessly died. There’s Adam, a young boy who loves to camp and hike with his family and whose love for the environment leads him to action when he sees his environment under attack.

There’s Alison, a housewife from a small town in rural Connecticut who gets jolted into the public arena when a developer starts to drain the water from a large marsh that borders her yard. Nervous but determined, she speaks out at the town meeting. A neighbor subsequently encourages her to join the League of Women Voters, which she does, expanding her skills and networks.

Loeb presents these and many other rich stories of “ordinary” folk not just for the sake of telling good stories but for at least two other essential reasons

First, Loeb wants to convince his readers that the “I can’t get involved because only important

people can bring about change” attitude isn’t valid. The Alisons, Virginias, and Adams help weaken if not entirely dismiss that argument.

Second, Loeb wants to affirm that getting involved can—and often does—come from self-interest. It’s okay to get involved in the larger arena because someone or something we care about is at risk. The reader can’t argue “I can only get involved if I am totally altruistic.”

By weaving in stories of ordinary folk, Loeb begins to tackle the obstacles that prevent involvement in social change. One particular obstacle is the “historical amnesia” that affects the younger generation.

Students’ superficial understanding of pivotal events in U.S. history, Loeb notes, has real consequence for their own choices. He discusses, as an example, the case of Rosa Parks.

Many students think that Parks just happened to sit on a bus and then just happened to refuse to give up her seat to a white person. They have a distorted notion of the full context and import of the decision Parks made.

As Loeb notes, Parks was a long-time activist with the local NAACP chapter. She had attended, the very summer before, a 10-day training session at the famous social change organizing school, the Highlander Center in Tennessee, where she had studied previous attempts to change the segregationist South.

In short, “Parks’s decision didn’t come out of nowhere.”

Why is this important? For one thing, because knowing that Rosa Parks had been in training can help others realize that they, too, can

“learn” about nonviolent social change.

For another, because knowing that Rosa Parks was part of a movement helps the reader understand the importance of working with others.

Finally, knowing all about Rosa Parks gives us a concrete example of someone who faced real difficulties over a period of years and did not give up. Parks provides, in short, a realistic yet hope-filled example of someone who made a difference.

Related to historical amnesia is another distortion: the feeling that the ordinary citizen is simply not knowledgeable enough to get involved in any sort of movement for social change.

Loeb calls this the “perfect standard,” a concept he explored in his earlier work, *Generation at the Crossroads: Apathy and Action on the American Campus* (1994).

This “perfect standard” constraint inhibits ordinary folks from getting involved because it suggests that only after they have selected the most important issue in the world, only after they totally understand this most important issue and can eloquently explain it as well as act on it with moral consistency, only then are they allowed to get involved.

With the stories of Alison, Virginia, Adam, and others, Loeb helps readers understand that the perfect standard is perfect for just one group: those who benefit from the status quo.

As Loeb makes clear, if we want to bring about a world of more justice, more equality, more compassion, a world with more involvement by all citizens, then we can't let the supporters of the status quo

prevent us from getting involved by holding up a false standard.

We can't wait until we are experts. We have to get involved now, with others, maybe haltingly at times, maybe imperfectly, but involved. Or nothing will change.

Through stories and their interpretations, Loeb provides the beginnings of a theory of social change. Change can come about when ordinary folks, motivated at least in part by self-interest, who have some knowledge of their social-change predecessors, decide to do something.

But how do we get involved? Loeb's answer: One step at a time, at a reasonable pace, with balance in our lives, supported by communities that affirm our identity and share our passion, sustained by religious faith or humanistic or other core values, motivated by a vision of a better world and a desire to bring about that vision.

Obviously, social change work is not as linear as this list makes it seem. And, surely, there will be moments of frustration, perhaps even moments close to despair. The threat of burnout is real, and here Loeb is especially helpful, both in naming the threat and in helping the reader appreciate that the structures of power are strong and will not give way easily.

We need, notes Loeb, a vision to sustain us. We need to acknowledge our doubts and anxieties. We need to renew our strength and spirits.

“The cure for doubt isn't certainty,” he says, “it's commitment.”

And how can we stick with social change work for the long haul?

Loeb's answer: With “radical patience,” knowing that the journey itself is important. “Those who

work most steadfastly for justice relish the struggle,” according to Loeb.

We celebrate the small steps we take as individuals, but especially those steps we take with others. We gain strength from a vision of a global community that needs each of us to do what we can, realizing that there are others around the world doing their part to advance human dignity, freedom, and justice.

We are part of something larger than ourselves: “The challenge is to ask what we want to stand for, and to do our best to act on our beliefs. For our choices will create the world that we pass on.”

Loeb’s book ends with a resource guide of concrete suggestions for getting involved. I may have wanted other items included as well, but this remains just the same a useful listing. The wired

reader can also turn to Loeb’s Web site for further information: [www.soulofacitizen.org](http://www.soulofacitizen.org).

My only real complaint has less to do with substance than with format: There is no index, making it difficult to do detailed analysis in an academic setting. But that complaint is muted by the well-written, engaging style of the book and, even more, by the compelling case Loeb makes for “living with conviction in a cynical time.” ■

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