In Our Hands

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Two important August anniversaries—one somber message.

On August 6, we marked the 57th anniversary of the signing into law of the Voting Rights Act. For me it was not so much a time for celebration as a call to action. In 2022, we have fewer voter protections than we did in 1965, after the 2013 Supreme Court decision gutting the VRA enabled a wave of state measures to restrict voting and election engagement. Candidates who continue to spread the long disproven myth about stolen elections are now running for and winning races for key local, state, and federal offices that will impact the administration of the 2022 midterm elections and beyond.

August 12 marked the 5th anniversary of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. Its outpouring of racist violence resulted in lives lost and lives forever impacted by the trauma of that day. The Charlottesville anniversary comes in the wake of this year’s January 6 congressional hearings and the fallout from the Justice Department’s search for classified documents with potential national security implications held at Mar-a-Lago. The Justice Department and FBI search prompted acts of violence and further threats of violence against government representatives.

If the democratic process were a medical patient, it would be in the critical care unit.

As hard as it may be, now is the time to resist the very human and understandable impulse to disengage from a deeply flawed and broken process. As William Pitt Rivers states in his essay “The Ballot or the Bullet,” “A system broken by nonparticipation requires a different remedy.” Voting and engagement in the electoral process is one tool among many to engage the civic process. It is the starting line, not the finish line of advocacy. No
single thing we do brings about change, but that’s not a reason not to do it. We need to show up, in whatever way we can, in all the ways that we can. Because if we don’t show up, other interests will fill the void.

There is an ancient story told of an old woman whose wisdom and knowledge amazed the children of her village. (I have heard several versions of the story, but I do not know the original source.) A boy in the village was determined to test her and prove she wasn’t all-knowing. He caught a small songbird in a net and, holding the bird in one hand, gathered his friends and went to the old woman’s house. He had devised a plan to fool the old woman. He would hold his hands behind his back and ask her if the bird in his hand was dead or alive. If she answered that it was dead, he would release the bird and let it fly away. If she answered alive, he would crush it in his hand. As he held his hands behind his back, he asked, “Old woman, this bird in my hand, is it dead or alive?” “It is in your hands,” she said.

Yes, it often seems like it is out of our hands, as though forces much larger than our individual and collective actions are at work. I know. But I also believe that choosing faith-filled, nonviolent engagement in the public narrative and the civic process, in whatever way we can, is essential for change. I think of this quote from poet and activist Audre Lorde: “The enormity of our task, to turn the world around. . . . I must be content with how really little I can do, and still do it, with an open heart.”

It is for each of us who believe in a just and compassionate world for all God’s people to search our hearts and find what that little thing may be. And then do it with an open heart.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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