



Adam Taylor,
author of *Mobilizing Hope*

A Transformed Nonconformist

You're just finishing up a year as a White House Fellow. How were you chosen for this experience and what kinds of things did you participate in throughout your time?

The selection process was a pretty long and arduous one over the course of about four months. It started with an application. The field was narrowed down to just over one hundred regional finalists out of over a thousand applicants. I then participated in a full day of regional finalist interviews and was selected to be among thirty finalists. The finalists participate in three days of interviews, dinners and networking events with the President's Commission, which includes leaders such as General Wesley Clark, former Senator Sarbanes, Tom Brokaw, eBay founder Pierre Omidyar and CARE president Helene Gayle, among others. Needless to say, it was humbling to be interviewed by such an impressive group. The Commission then had what I imagine to be an impossible task of choosing a class of fifteen Fellows.

In addition to weekly seminars with leaders in politics, media and civil society and a series of policy-oriented domestic and international trips, every Fellow serves for a year working in the White House or at a federal agency. This year I had the opportunity to work in three different offices within the White House. In the Office of Cabinet Affairs, I served as the liaison between the White House and a diverse group of agencies, including the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Peace Corps, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the Office of Personnel Management and the Office of National Drug Control Policy. In the Office of Public Engagement I served as the liaison to leaders and organizations that work on domestic poverty, organizing conference calls, meetings and a half-day conference on expanding economic security and opportunity. Through the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs I co-coordinated the president's task force on Puerto Rico's status, which makes recommendations to the president on how to resolve the delicate issue of status and advance economic development on the island.

Much like President Obama, you have an interesting family background and faith story. How did those influence this book?

The book was inspired by my experiences and experiments in transformed nonconformism. First and foremost, my parents' deep and abiding commitment to diversity and justice inspired the book. My African American mother and white father made the controversial decision to get married in 1968, the same year Dr. King was assassinated. My biracial background has often enabled me to serve as a bridge across racial divisions and differences as I've strived to foster respect, reconciliation and a commitment to racial justice. My obsession with the history of the civil rights struggle planted a belief in the power of faith-



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inspired social movements and awakened within me a conviction that my generation inherits the unfinished business from previous social movements. The book tries to capture my lifelong journey to learn from and stand tall within that legacy, while developing new strategies and tactics that fit our present reality. My political activism has been shaped by my understanding that we serve a God of unconditional love and justice, who shows a particular concern for the marginalized and vulnerable.

My faith and activism has been influenced by many different strands within the Christian faith tradition, from Catholic social teaching's emphasis on human dignity to Pentecostalism's reliance on the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to the historical black church's embrace of liberation alongside salvation to a Mennonite commitment to nonviolence, among others. After graduating from college, I spent a number of years running away from a call to ministry, in large part because I only associated a call with pastoral ministry. I learned to never limit God and that ministry in its most holistic sense includes everything that advances God's kingdom and spreads the good news. During a foolhardy hike in which I tried to test God for an answer while jeopardizing my life trying to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, I had the revelation that my call to ministry and passion for social justice were inextricably linked. My faith has been the motivating and sustaining force behind my activism.

Why did you decide to call your book *Mobilizing Hope*?

Hope is the oxygen behind social and political change. Hope illuminates new possibilities and can make what was once impossible become inevitable. We have access to an inexhaustible, limitless and resilient hope because of Christ's victory over sin and death on Calvary's cross. Activism without hope can easily become self-serving, self-righteous and angry. As I write in the book, "Activism without hope is like a balloon drained of air; it quickly deflates and loses its ability to rise in the air. Hope is the oxygen that inspires and sustains activism. Too often campaigns fail because of a deficit of hope. Too much spite, anger or malice suffocates the hope out of activism. Hope animates our vision of what's possible and guides what we are striving to achieve in the context of transformed nonconformism. Fortunately, hope is at the very heart of faith." Hope and faith are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing. Hope is the antidote to fear. Hope enables people to withstand incredible adversity and hold on even in the midst of persecution or seemingly impossible odds. Hope fuels and shapes our vision of a preferred future. For campaigns for social and political change to be successful, they must harness and sustain hope.

You have a new vision for activism for what you call the "post-civil rights generation." Can you explain how you see injustices being addressed in today's culture?

There is no magic bullet or cookie-cutter approach to activism. The book tries to offer a series of tools that allow us to identify and address the root causes of injustice. While many injustices are more covert and institutionalized than during previous generations, injustice



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continually mutates and shows up in both old and new forms—whether through human trafficking/slavery, the prison industrial complex, global climate change or concentrated poverty. In order to be effective change agents, we must learn from the tactics and methods of past movements while avoiding getting stuck in old tapes. A younger generation is addressing injustice through a range of mediums and vehicles, including by harnessing technology through the Internet, social networking sites, etc. However, these tools shouldn't replace grass-roots organizing that is built upon mutual values and interests, real relationships, and effectively designed campaigns. I try to demystify activism in the book and make civic engagement much more accessible and compelling by lifting up the example of real-life young leaders that have had an impact at the local, regional, national and global levels—whether it's Brian Swarts and the living wage campaign in Oregon, Christa Mazzone organizing efforts against domestic poverty, or Heber Brown's efforts to end genocide in Darfur.

The book was also written to clarify for my generation the distinct character of charity versus systemic justice since these so often get confused and conflated. I also wanted to challenge my and subsequent generations who have increasingly embraced a commitment to service to also embrace a commitment to civic engagement and activism.

Does activism need faith? And vice versa?

At their best, activism and faith are mutually reinforcing and interdependent. Activism is integral to living out our Christian discipleship and directly tied into building God's kingdom come. Faith provides the vision and motivation behind activism—a sustaining and empowering source for change. Faith without a commitment to activism can often become narcissistic and myopic. Activism without the sustaining power and discipline of faith can often burn out or go astray. However, faith does not have a monopoly on morality or effective activism. Many of the best movements have been driven by faith but were always inclusive, involving people of conscience and of no religious faith at all.

Many people don't see Jesus as an activist, and therefore don't feel Christians are called to civic or political engagement. What would you say to them?

I would tell them to reexamine Jesus and resist ways in which our culture has overly de-radicalized and domesticated Christ. Christ wasn't political in the sense we know it today, but he cared about and spoke to every dimension of human life, including the social, political and economic. Christ's bold entrance into the temple in which he overturns the tables of the moneychangers for defiling the temple and exploiting the people is just one of many examples we could point to of Christ's activism and creative maladjustment. Christ wasn't revolutionary in the way we typically understand it today—he did not lead a political revolution to overthrow the oppression of the Roman Empire, as much as many of the Jews hoped he would. Instead he led a spiritual revolution of values that represented a threat to the Pharisees as well as the Roman Empire. We should remember that Christ was ultimately crucified for the political transgression of sedition.



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You mention in your book that Dr. Martin Luther King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech is far from being realized. How so?

Too often we reduce Dr. King’s message to the narrow goal of civil rights, in which no one is discriminated against because of the color of their skin and instead people are judged by the content of their character. The United States has made incredible strides in achieving this goal, including through electing its first black president. However, Dr. King was also a tireless champion for greater economic opportunities for the disenfranchised and disinherited. For instance, he marched with sanitation workers in Memphis before his tragic assassination who were campaigning for a living wage, and he was organizing a poor-people march to bring the issue of poverty to the top of the nation’s national agenda. Dr. King also spoke out against the unnecessary evils of the Vietnam War. Therefore, achieving Dr. King’s vision of the beloved community requires overcoming institutionalized racism, expanding economic opportunity to all Americans and pursuing nonviolence, among others.

As you mentioned earlier, you write in your book that “hope animates our vision of what’s possible and guides what we are striving to achieve.” What is your hope for the future?

My hope for the future is that we can find new ways to find common ground across the chasm of partisanship and culture that divides the U.S. and that the church serves at the forefront of revitalizing our democracy by engaging in politics on behalf of the weak, the vulnerable and the oppressed. I hope that a younger generation can revive the spirit of the early Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and apply a resilient commitment to social justice to the most pressing issues and crises facing the nation and world. I hope that we can build a bridge from our current predicaments to a new reality that accelerates God’s kingdom come by creating kingdom space in the here and now.



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