

Observe, Judge, Act

Fifty-six years ago, I was recruited by a very young and pious Christian Brother to become a member of his Catholic Social Action cell. Even at the tender age of 14, I knew he was pious because he wore a black skull cap, which he constantly repositioned on the top of his head. Apparently, it had to sit just so.

Parenthetically, my young recruiter was also the same person who left religious life years later to become a public raging alcoholic and was eventually killed in a fiery automobile crash while driving under the influence. I don't believe there is any relationship between the before and after of this man's life, but it does give me pause, as I reflect about this accidental pairing of youthful religious idealism and late-middle-age adult despair.

As I remember it, there were six cell members, all of us the same age. We met once a month in the evening in one of the small parlors used by the religious order to receive visitors. For some reason, these meetings, and even the very existence of our cell, seemed secretive and clandestine. This was due, I think, to the palpable intensity generated by our cell leader, and the fact that he spoke deliberately in breathless and hushed tones. At our first meeting, he made it clear that he had handpicked each one of us for cell membership. He had chosen us, we were special, and therefore different – better, I presumed – than the other students in the high school. Why we were thought to be better, I did not know, save for the fact that we had been chosen.

Many years later, during my first semester week at Stanford University, I was made to feel this way by professors who reminded the class that we had been chosen to attend the university, not the other way around. We were chosen because we were exceptional students, and therefore the usual grading standards that applied to other universities were not applicable to us. Mere attendance at class, we were told, was the only requirement for satisfactorily completing the course. Neither as a Stanford student nor as a cell member did I completely embrace the principle that a chosen person is a better person, but some of that mind-set rubbed off on me, I'm sure.

I cannot recall the agenda of the social action meetings, except that we recited in unison a special prayer, followed by a presentation given by our cell leader

about the need to participate in Catholic Social Action. After his short exhortation, he attempted to lead us in discussion. I say attempt because my recollection is we were so young and naive that we did not know what he was talking about or what kind of participation he expected of us. If he knew, either he couldn't explain it to us or it passed right over the tops of our heads. Saying the prayer in unison and listening to him speak was adequate participation, it seemed.

But clear as crystal, now at age 70, I remember the three principles of Catholic Social Action expounded by this young idealist during our cell meetings: Observe. Judge. Act. If we wanted to be members in good standing with Catholic Social Action, we were duty-bound to observe, judge, and act.

Observe what? Judge how? Do what? Certainly, this religious Brother, as young and inexperienced as he was, must have explained the use of these principles, but I cannot say for sure. I can only speculate that we cell members were to observe the conduct and behavior of other students, judge whether it was right or (presumably) wrong, and then take action to change it. At age 14 and newly arrived from a small rural town, which was surrounded by rice fields, I felt ill-equipped to accept the responsibility of changing either my freshman classmates, or God forbid, sophomores.

I faithfully attended all the cell meetings, said the prayer in unison, tried to understand the exhortations of our leader, and eventually the school year came to a close. The following year I entered the religious order of the Christian Brothers and began to make my way through their rigorous monastic religious training program. Just like the rest, I applied myself, I took direction from my superiors, I grew up, I became a high school teacher, and I became a social justice activist. But I tell you that NOTHING in my life since age 14 has served me better – or landed me in more hot water – than those damn principles of observe, judge, act.