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Global Citizenship and Responsibility

Diane Michelfelder

*L*et me start by thanking the organizers of this inaugural Macalester Civic Forum as one of the initiatives of our new Institute for Global Citizenship, for putting together this session in particular, and for inviting me to take part in this exciting conversation and sharing of perspectives on the meaning of global citizenship. Such an occasion is an example of liberal arts learning at its best: an opportunity to look at the same phenomenon from multiple angles and points of view, and see what can spring forth as a result.

I must confess I initially thought the invitation to be a part of a forum whose explicit purpose was the collegial exchange of “meditations on global citizenship” was perhaps extended to me by mistake. The word “meditations” brings with it the suggestive, philosophical ring of thoughts to oneself assembled in serenity and calm. In this light, a “meditative provost” is strikingly oxymoronic. What I have to offer here are perhaps less meditations in any traditional sense of the word than thoughts on the go. Still, I hope they will be intelligible and also reflect the probing seriousness that characterizes the spirit of this occasion.

Becoming a global citizen, as all of us know, does not happen by virtue of simply belonging to the world; rather, it is the result of active and sustained thought, energy, and effort. To be a citizen of a particular country frequently does not require any action on one’s part other than just “showing up,” being born to this or that set of parents in this or that set of specific circumstances. But global citizens are made, not

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born. When we accept the identity of being a global citizen, we accept the responsibilities that are both complex in their nature and reflective of significant breadth of scope.

When we say that at Macalester we value the formation of global citizenship, we are saying in part that we value something whose formation is directly linked to goods that are ethical in nature. Not everything we hold as a valuable part of the student academic experience at Macalester has that explicit connection (for example, how to craft a logical, intellectually penetrating, and eloquent essay). I would venture, however, that no matter what definition one gives to global citizenship with respect to its transcending or not transcending citizenship in traditional nation-states, the cultivation of a sense of responsibility is an elemental component of what it is all about.

How can we best take on the duties of shaping the student academic experience at Macalester in order to promote such a sense of responsibility? I want to use most of my time here to focus on what Macalester's commitment to fostering global citizenship might mean with respect to our sense of academic purpose, as well as to the shape of our academic structure and programming. I will, though, begin not with the local but with the global, with some observations about global citizenship in a fairly broad context of responsibility, and with the idea in mind that it is from this wider context that a foothold can be found for thinking about the question just raised.

From my perspective, a global citizen is someone who takes responsibility for the health of the common good. A global citizen understands responsibility as a form of stewardship—stewardship for what humanity shares, for what it holds in common, and on which it deeply depends. Perhaps the most obvious and transparent example of something in which we all share, hold in common, and on which we deeply depend is the environment. So, for example, the philosopher Peter Singer starts out his book *One World* by talking about the relationship between scientific causality and ethical responsibility in regard to the earth's atmosphere. If the carbon emissions I produce as a result of my driving habits contribute to a condition that leads to floods that kill hundreds of people halfway around the world, the knowledge that I may have contributed to such a disaster ought to give me pause and lead me to make changes in how I get from the location where I am to the place where I want to be.¹

This spring, Stavros Dimas, the environment commissioner for the European Union, called for speed limits to be placed on the remaining

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6,000 or so kilometers of EU roadway that still lack them: the German autobahn. The German environment minister immediately objected to this suggestion, describing the approach to be “a trivialization” of the climate problem.² Yet it could equally be said that Dimas’s approach is a way of optimizing individual responsibility for decreasing carbon emissions in particular and for protecting the environment in general. To consider the responsibility associated with global citizenship in this light amounts to defining responsibility along fairly straightforward and conventional lines. To put it another way, the causal “frame” within which I would weigh my responsibilities as a global citizen is really no different from the one in which I would weigh my responsibilities as an ordinary citizen. If I do not pay the taxes I owe, everyone suffers. If I do not vote, my inaction might throw the election to the other candidate. Macalester College Environmental Studies major Timothy Den Herder-Thomas asked in an essay in a recent student publication, why take my cell phone charger out of the wall when it is not in use?³ If I leave it in, I directly contribute to “standby power waste,” which worldwide makes up some 5–15% of all residential energy consumption.⁴ If my doing “x” locally contributes to a devastating “y” on a global scale, then responsible ethical action implies I should do something different in order that “y” be lessened and ameliorated.

Let us now switch the scenario to consider another type of loss: the erosion of the world’s languages. Recently, the *International Herald Tribune* reported there are now only eighteen native speakers remaining of Manchu, the prevailing language spoken during the Qing dynasty, whose existence spanned the period from the mid-17th century until the Republic of China was formed in 1911.⁵ All of its current native speakers are more than eighty years old. With 6.6 billion people in the world speaking nearly 6,900 languages, but with only 200 of these languages spoken by more than a million people, one can imagine many similar stories of irreversible loss to follow⁶—and to follow all too quickly, if the numerous predictions showing half of these languages disappearing by the end of this century are to be trusted.⁷

In an essay appearing in Frederic Jameson’s provocative volume *Cultures of Globalization*, Duke University professor Walter Mignolo (one of the featured speakers in our 2005 International Roundtable on *Don Quixote*) draws attention to the fact that of the twenty-five languages spoken by 75% of the world’s people, the number of people speaking non-colonial languages exceeds those speaking English and other colonizing languages.⁸ This is an intriguing point to consider

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with respect to the currents of globalization, but for the moment I want to concentrate on the following question: As a global citizen, does a person have a responsibility to help prevent linguistic erosion on a global scale, just as he or she might have a responsibility to prevent environmental degradation on a global scale?

I, and probably many of you as well, would say yes. Just as we owe the environment our stewardship, we owe it to language as well, as language is something humanity shares and on which it deeply depends. Linguistic diversity creates a kind of mulch, as it were, out of which new ideas and new perspectives can emerge; and as inheritors of the liberal arts tradition of education, it is particularly incumbent upon us to preserve multiplicities of perspectives. Still, it is difficult—perhaps not impossible but decidedly difficult—to draw out the responsibility in any kind of causal way that a person might have in this context. I can trace causal connections between energy usage, climate change, and human welfare, but it's harder for me to draw causal connections between, on the one hand, my speaking English on this particular evening and, on the other hand, my contributing to the disappearance of Manchu or Scottish Gaelic or some other endangered language.

This leads me to consider the possibility that one characteristic of the responsibility associated with global citizenship is capaciousness. To be global citizens, we need to be capacious enough in our thinking to imagine common goods where they might not be self-evident. We must have a capacious sense of ethical responsibility in order to do our part in protecting and enhancing those goods where the causal linkages between what we do and their diminishment may not be easily traced.

Let me now approach this point about capacious responsibility from a different angle. Built into responsibility in this sense is a willingness to take risks. It is the willingness to refrain from quickly dismissing a people or particular individuals because of their beliefs or cultural practices, to extricate ourselves from the familiarity of our own comfort zones, and to accept responsibilities toward strangers as well as toward those with whom we share our lives in more intimate ways. Additionally, the more informed we are, the more we may grow in our adeptness to assume risk, capacious responsibility, and the attitude of global citizenship.

In *One World*, Peter Singer mentions the well-known essay by the philosopher Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in which Williams cautions us in addressing ethical questions not to have

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what he called, “one thought too many.”⁹ Suppose you as my neighbor or friend are in need of a ride to the airport, which I offer to provide. Williams argues I do not need any justification for why my action is the right thing to do beyond pointing to the facts that you are my friend or neighbor and that I bear you some affection. If, however, I justify what I am doing by noting our friendship and adding that when I give preferential treatment to my friends I end up bringing more good into the world than when I don’t, Singer would wonder if I am not “overthinking” the situation. But from the perspective of good global citizenship, an additional thought such as this one is necessary, for the very reason that it might not be additional at all but rather the only justification at one’s disposal. Without an impartial justification at hand, something like respect for fellow citizens as members of a global community, I may not be motivated at all to act responsively for the sake of strangers. But to claim that “we are all in this together” or, perhaps more elegantly, that we are all fellow citizens in an interdependent global community, may in many situations be a fairly “thin” and consequently ineffective justification for helping to improve the literacy rates of women worldwide, for example, or otherwise better the conditions of those living in dire situations. The more context, the more knowledge and information I have, the more I might be propelled toward not only seeing a complex ethical dilemma reflected in a particular situation but also adjusting what I do in the course of my everyday activities to respond to it. Context can help to turn the notion of a human community from an abstract concept into a more concrete notion, and can provide greater traction for responsible action than abstract ethical principles alone.

With this as a backdrop, let me now turn to the question, “What would a Macalester College that was fully ‘encultured’ with the goal of helping prepare students to be global citizens look like?” In particular, what would it look like with respect to academic programs and the structures that animate and support them?

I do not see any need for us to make global changes to promote global citizenship. The history and mission that give form to the vibrant identity of Macalester College render unnecessary a radical revamping of our academic priorities. I do, though, see numerous opportunities for change that would enhance both academic community and academic inquiry while at the same time leading to what we could call an intellectually sustainable environment for the promotion of global citizenship.

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First of all, helping students achieve the understanding that provides the traction for responsible action as a global citizen is arguably the provenance of all academic departments within the College. We need to continue to pay particular attention to the cultivation of critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and the understanding of issues related to race, gender, and class. We must encourage fluency in at least one language other than English, knowledge of the world's religious traditions, scientific understanding, geographic literacy, and what is now being called critical information literacy (understood not only as the acquisition of the ability to separate good online information from bad, but also as the strengthening of the will to seek out information on websites or blogs so that you get to meet up with what is *other* and very unfamiliar).

As a lead-in for my next point, I'd like to turn to a passage taken from a talk given by Robert Weisbuch at the 2005 annual meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies but originating in David Damrosch's book, *We Scholars*:

Too often, American scholars still hold fast to a hermeneutics of exile, using their specialized knowledge to dwell in a distant time within an esoteric disciplinary space, returning periodically like Rip Van Winkle from his inaccessible mountain retreat. We scholars rightly cherish our independence of mind and our originality of concept, but we need to balance the hermeneutics of exile with a more creative hermeneutics of community.¹⁰

There are many good signs at Macalester that the creative hermeneutics of community is flourishing with respect to the kind of community Damrosch had in mind, including the Urban Faculty Seminar and courses resulting from it, such as the History Department's "The Global in the Local," the Lake Street Project, this spring's Environmental Studies senior seminar in which students are getting experience writing grant proposals for the new EcoHouse, and so forth. Yet for us to fully invest ourselves in supporting global citizenship as a student learning outcome and as a subject of academic inquiry and reflection—with regard to both public scholarship and its more traditional forms—we need to be able to engender a more creative hermeneutics of community within Macalester College itself.

The physical layout of academic space at Macalester does not easily lend itself to the smooth circulation of creative ideas and the formation of programs that cross disciplinary lines. Seen from a geographical/

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political science perspective, our academic structure is rather akin to a collection of nation-states. We are certainly not unlike many other liberal arts colleges in this regard, but without sacrificing the importance of department- or division-based place, we need to act more transnationally, as it were, if we are to build superlative programs supportive of scholarly inquiry related to global issues. There are certainly such promising programs in various stages of development and conversation on campus—the Fellows program in global citizenship and leadership connected to the Institute, and a concentration in community and public health and another in human rights and humanitarianism, to name three. These potential programs represent a good deal of appealing “traction” for the development of responsible global citizenship among our students. While it will be challenging, I hope we will be able to advance all of these good ideas beyond the planning stages.

Along with this, it would be good to think of what we could do to take a more “global in the local” perspective here “in house.” Recently in Chicago I had the pleasure of attending a symposium at the American Chemical Society meeting in recognition of Professor Emeritus Truman Schwartz, the 2007 recipient of the George C. Pimentel Award in Chemistry Education, and to hear Truman talk about his experience as a practitioner of the liberal art of Chemistry. It meant not only assigning students readings by chemists, for instance, but also asking them to discuss how the Second Law of Thermodynamics is involved in Shakespeare’s plays.¹¹ The more imaginative work of this sort that we can do, the more our students’ minds are primed for the big-picture thinking that global citizenship demands.

Another closely connected question is how to have more hospitable physical spaces for curricular and co-curricular programming that facilitate cross-disciplinary inquiry. In this regard, I believe the proposed Institute for Global Citizenship building is an exemplary step toward creating a place that can be both an intellectual commons for many faculty at Macalester as well as a space to bring our own community together with the larger community of which we are a part.

Finally, and to return to the idea of meditation with which these thoughts began, we live in a time marked not only by the scale of the global, but by great variety of scale, from the global to the “nano.” With the latter scale in mind, I am mindful that this is also a time when our attention is easily, even rapidly, deflected from one thing to the next. In the years to come we will need to find some way to build greater capacity within our students for sustained or capacious (to use

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that word again) attentiveness, which is a prerequisite, much like critical thinking or other skills we aim to cultivate as part of a liberal arts education, for effective and ethical global citizenship.

Let me close with this observation. Both the process of inspiring others to become global citizens and the process of becoming one oneself require intellectual reach and stamina. Assisting our students to develop the intellectual wherewithal, the nuanced judgment, and the will to live lives of global citizenship is work that takes much imagination, collective engagement, and focus. It is, though, critical work to do. I am confident that as we take it up, those who will come after us will look back upon it and see it reflective of the integrity, distinctiveness, and exceptionality that characterize so much of what Macalester faculty, staff, and students do. But until we get to this point, as Andrew Latham said, let the open-ended conversation about global citizenship begin! ●

Notes

1. Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).
2. "Germany's Warming Policies Hit Speed Bump," MSNBC (12 March 2007). Accessed online on 3 June 2007 at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17579948>.
3. *Babel International Magazine*, Volume 1, Issue 3 (2007).
4. Garth Cambay, "Watt's a WALL-SPIDER?," *Science in Africa* (November 2005). Accessed online on 4 May 2007 at <http://www.scienceinafrica.co.za/2005/november/wall-spider.htm>.
5. David Lagne, "Voice of an Empire, All but Extinct," *International Herald Tribune* (17–18 March 2007): 1.
6. The source for the number of world's languages is Raymond G. Gordon, Jr., ed., *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 15th ed. (Dallas, Texas: SIL International, 2005). Accessed online on 3 June 2007 at <http://www.ethnologue.com>.
7. Lagne, op. cit.
8. Walter D. Mignolo, "Globalization, Civilization Processes, and the Relocation of Languages and Cultures," in *The Cultures of Globalization*, edited by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998).
9. Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 18. Cited in *One World*, p. 162.
10. David Damrosch, *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). Cited by Robert Weisbuch in "The Silence—and the Noise—of the Humanities," *The Humanities and its Publics*, ACLS Occasional Paper #61, ACLS, 2006.
11. Truman Schwartz, "Chemistry Education, Science Literacy, and the Liberal Arts," forthcoming in *The Journal of Chemical Education*.