

ACOSA CAREER AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

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I'd like to start with thanks to so many—Julie and the committee, my wife Pat for so many things, Mark (Homan) and Tracy (Soska) for their support, my close friends and comrades in academic arms, Bob Fisher and Mike Fabricant, and especially my friend and colleague of over 35 years, Terry Mizrahi, whom I am quite convinced made this award possible. Thanks, when it takes place over many years, turns into something far more lasting. Terry, Bob, and others, I stand here now, filled with gratitude for your presence in my life.

I also am filled with humility, the kind that made writing these brief words more than a little difficult. So let me start with a metaphor that may be out there a little in left field, but, hey, I've lived out there most of my adult life. I want to start with the seasons. For while I cannot speak for other parts of the country, in the Northeast, autumn is our favorite season. It is of course different from the youth of spring, with hope bursting forth with robins' egg blues and buttercup yellows, followed by the mature heat of summer, where passion is enveloped in the mid-day oranges and reds of just commitment. What makes autumn so special is not that the colors of hope and passion are forsaken but that they now stand alongside the rich yet more muted hues of burnt sienna and golden amber, where awareness of perspective, gained and missed opportunities and, yes, loss also can be found.

I stand here with what I passionately hope is autumnal perspective on myself and what truly matters about this award. I have few illusions about my prominence. I am not now nor have ever sought to be a national figure; others whose work I admire, like Marie Weil, Lorraine Gutterrez, and Bob Fisher, have published far more widely and to more deserved acclaim than me. And without Terry, my role on the Macro Commission inside this profession would have been more muted than burnt sienna itself.

But we of ACOSA carry within us one central belief that Martin Luther King's words exemplify: "*That the arc of history, while long, bends towards social justice.*" Finding ourselves here in Atlanta three days before the most important election of our lifetimes—which, unlike 2008, is for all the **wrong** reasons—helps us realize how much that belief can and will be tested over a lifetime.

If I am up here for any reason, it is that my life and work has centered on that belief, and that I have attempted, inside and outside the classroom, to pass on to my students and others why such a belief enriches and enhances *our own lives* as well as, hopefully, those with whom we work and struggle to make this world a better, more just, and equitable place.

For me, to have made social justice the core tenet of how to live in and act on the world did not come so easily. As a young man, I certainly *thought* I was a warrior for just causes, only to be tested that there is a large gap between one's *fervent desire to be seen as a crusader* as opposed to simply going about the daily work of fighting for equality, fairness, and the common ground of our mutual humanity. Luckily, many others provided me with the lessons I needed to evolve, ever so slowly, into what I now struggle to be each day.

First, as the aboriginal activist Lisa Watson said, "If you have come here to help me, then you are wasting your time...But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." To discover that I, the organizer, depended as much on others with whom I was organizing was a relief. It meant leaving behind the debilitating constructions of both "help" and "great organizer theories of organizing." Such constructions, with their mix of condescension towards those with less power and the demand of unattainable perfection for the professional, loses sight of the humanity in us all. Experiencing that humanity every day is a wonderfully comforting place in which to live.

Second was to discover what Paulo Freire meant when he wrote, “only the oppressed can save themselves and their oppressors from their mutual dehumanization.” There are of course many layers to Freire’s writings, but I wish to focus on only one here: **power**. If one *truly* believes what Freire has written, a professional’s relationship to power shifts: instead of pursuing it, you come to realize it must be shared without being able to *give it* to anybody. This paradox encompasses the primary objective I have for all my organizing classes: ***that by the end of each term, the students will have gained power over our learning, while I will have lost none.*** Respecting students enough to challenge them to do so—and thus that they will come to challenge me—is a liberating way to teach, for even after 40 years I begin each term with the excitement that I never know what I am about to learn.

Finally, there is a mixture of two other ideas--- ***to embody the change you seek***, as Ghandi said, alongside a simple, paradoxically connected one from Paulo again—“***to be fully human is to be incomplete.***” Kind of odd, right? Why would anyone want to embody incompleteness? Well, it’s all about that “fully human” part, too. I have learned the hard way that the false generosity of romanticizing the oppressed stems in large part from an inability to fully love one’s self...that true love includes the self love of embracing both what I am good at as well as admitting I am flawed and, yes, incomplete. My struggle to embrace my own tactical self-awareness is to affirm that sometimes I write well and have good ideas *and*—never but- other times I am too quick to react with anger, sloppy with details...you know, an incomplete mess.

And what freedom that creates in relationships...I need others to help me through: just as I can be there for them, just as they have been and will be there for me. Consecrating that belief each and every day through the little things we do together, whether planning a major campaign or remembering to say hello in the hallway to people I barely know, turns routine work into sacred acts of joint commitment. Embodying that change is always *con la gente*, (with the people)...how fortunate that now I know that I am just one of those *gente*, too.

This quiet certainty of unspoken reciprocity makes late autumn a pleasure, for a time will come when even the brightest, most vibrant leaves do fall. Winter arrives, and with it the bracing clarity of cold, crisp nights where faraway stars bring into full relief what truly has mattered all along. As our ancestors knew and have tried to guide us, one does not successfully prepare for winter either alone or without provisions. Such a harvest is not possible if the gifts of other seasons have been ignored. My heart is full tonight, not only for this award, but for the gifts of evergreen that so many have given me along the way, preparing my own modest harvest. May I have many more days and nights in which to share it with you.