

“A Farewell Address to Mrs. Somebody”

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Good afternoon.

I have a story to tell you – a story about four people: Everybody, anybody, somebody and nobody. You see, there was this important job to be done, and everybody was sure that somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but nobody did it.

Moral of this story: Where was busybody?

I know, bad pun – my coach made me do it.

But all puns aside, this story is an illustration of a role many of us recognize: The role of the ordinary citizen who neglects civic involvement. All too often, we place our civic responsibilities on the bottom of our to-do list.

Historically, the Greeks felt so strongly about the importance of active citizenship that they called anyone who chose to be, “just the ordinary citizen,” *idiotis*. Now, I won't call names, but I'm sure you all get the point. Caroline Kennedy wrote in *A Patriot's Handbook*, “In order for our democracy to thrive, each of us must give something back. Our society cannot sustain its vitality without the active participation of its citizens.”

So today, we will discover who active citizens are. Second, we will discuss our responsibilities as active citizens and what we can accomplish. And, finally, we will explore how we can emerge as active citizens in our society today.

So first, let us embody busybody and discover who active citizens are.

To begin, at the beginning of our story we need to find an ordinary citizen in our society. Now, if I were to ask you all what this ordinary citizen's civic involvements might include, I might induce such responses as, “Well, this ordinary citizen votes, pays taxes, car pools and, for good measure, volunteers.”

Using these things to create our ordinary citizen, we would come up with, “Shall I introduce you to Mrs. Somebody?” She always votes – in elections that matter – when she has time – and happens to remember. She pays her taxes religiously – to avoid being thrown in jail for tax evasion. She car pools in her neighbor's SUV and she spends an hour a month at the Red Cross – drinking coffee while her daughter's Brownie troop mops down the hall. Mrs. Somebody, the ordinary *idiotis*.

Perhaps you noticed the trend in her societal contributions? Her citizenship agenda is either compulsory or convenient. Mrs. Somebody is not enough. But she could take the advice of another “body,” former governor Jesse “The Body” Ventura – no relation to the “Body” family – who believes that active citizens are ordinary citizens who take Mrs. Somebody’s involvements and, as Emeril LaGasse says, “Bam! Kicks it up a notch.”

Here, in the world of forensics, we already have a handle on how to, “Bam!” our way from ordinary to active citizenship. We have our “informed,” extemping C-SPAN junkies, our criticizing and problem-solving orators, and finally our acting interpreters.

Like us “speechies,” active citizens inform themselves, they recognize and they criticize problems, and finally they act. But not to loss [sic], to solve them. So, you take an extemper, an orator and an interper, you put them together and what do you get? An active citizen.

Allow me to introduce you to our active citizen today. He was a young man, Joseph E. Perisco wrote of him in a biography, *My American Journey*. This young man was lazy; he was unenthused and uninvolved. He hadn’t found his spice to, “Kick it up a notch.” So he invested in worthwhile activities like poker, and chasing girls down to the corner drug store. But then something happened to change his life – he heard a young girl deliver an oratory about active citizenship. Actually, he found a mentor in an ROTC officer. Under his mentor’s guidance, he came to experience his first taste of leadership, and he saw a need, a need for leadership in the lives of young men like himself. He answered his call to active citizenship and today, Colin Powell, the Secretary of State, serves as a role model for the ideals of active citizenship.

So, now that our busybodying has revealed that active citizens are people – like you and I – waiting to happen, let’s get busy and discuss our responsibilities as active citizens and what we can accomplish.

Several weeks ago, I overheard a classmate of mine telling his friend that he had been nicknamed, “the Biscuit Man,” where he worked at our town’s local KFC. I was a little curious, so I asked how exactly he came to be “the Biscuit Man.” And he explained that for months he had worked the drive-thru and noticed that a large majority of his customers dismissed the use of their seatbelts. With the permission of his manager, he began a free biscuit incentive – when customers pulled up, he would give out a free biscuit for every person buckled up in a vehicle. He said regular customers began buckling their seatbelts as a result.

He was inspired to incite change through the tragedies of four classmates lost to traffic accidents. He saw a problem, and he answered the call of responsibility to

solve it. His actions reflect some of the most influential active citizens of our history, such as Elizabeth Katie Stanton and Chief Seattle. Shown through my classmate's actions and the historic movements of our history texts, active citizenship is the driving force for change in our society.

National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*, February 6, 2003, noted the inherent value of individual citizens' input in active participation. The involvement of people like you and I in our communities is a force that propels positive change within our society. Active citizenship is about pursuing the challenge of change. It is about how we use our freedoms to answer that challenge.

And active citizenship is about consequences. If we do not act, then who will? Nobody – and everybody will be left to ask why somebody didn't do what anybody could have done. It is time to bid farewell to the Mrs. Somebodies of the world. Let us be the ones to usher in a new level of active citizenship.

Marquise du Deffand said, "The distance is nothing. It is only the first step that is difficult." We can take that first step by making a personal commitment to promote positive change. As we leave Atlanta and return to our homes from San Francisco, California to Charleston, South Carolina, we have the potential to go home and put the "bam" into our civic involvement.

In the upcoming November election, we can cast our vote and raise the average voter turnout above the forty-nine percent reported by the latest U.S. census. An hour or two a week, we can lend a hand to our community through a literacy program, take part in local blood drives or we can simply make an honest effort to give out more compliments to our peers.

"You look radiant, today."

Active citizenship is a lifestyle. It is a personal commitment to promote positive change and we can make that commitment. Let it be us that takes the first step to cross the black line that ordinary citizens stand on, into the gray area of our society to let our voices be heard. The extraordinary power of active citizenship is in our hands.

I would like to introduce you to someone that holds that power of strength and potential.

"Hi, it's nice to meet you."

You see, we, we have something in common – potential. Potential that is yours, that is yours, that is ours to use to make a difference. I invite you as a fellow citizen to move civic involvement a little higher up on your to-do list, find the spice of your

life, and put the “bam” into your civic involvement. So, in the words of Marvin Gaye, “Let’s get it on,” and take the first step to release our potential through active citizenship.

In his final sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed, “If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don’t want a long speech, but I would like somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life for others. I just want to leave a committed life behind. Then my living will not be in vain.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. left a committed life behind. The question now is will we? We need take only one step, the first step toward the answer of active citizenship.

That brings us to the end of our story. There was an important job to be done, and everybody did it. Somebody saw a problem and knew that anybody could fix it. Nobody sat back to watch and everybody lived happily ever after.

Moral of the story: Let us embrace active citizenship and answer our challenge with a resounding, “Yes!”