Soul of a Citizen
by Paul Rogat Loeb

Introduction to Soul of a Citizen

Soul of a Citizen awakens within us the desire and the ability to make our voices heard and our actions count. We can lead lives worthy of our convictions. A book of inspiration and integrity, Soul of a Citizen is an antidote to the twin scourges of modern life—powerlessness and cynicism. In his evocative style, Paul Loeb tells moving stories of ordinary Americans who have found unexpected fulfillment in social involvement. Through their example and Loeb’s own wise and powerful lessons, we are compelled to move from passivity to participation. The reward of our action, we learn, is nothing less than a sense of connection and purpose not found in a purely personal life.

Praise for Soul of a Citizen

“I stayed up half the night reading Soul of a Citizen, finding it a beautiful and morally transcendent work. Paul Loeb is a personal hero of mine who gives decency and generosity a political character, in the humblest of ways.” --Jonathan Kozol

“Soul of a Citizen helps us find the faith we need to act on our deepest beliefs—and keep on.” --Marian Wright Edelman, president, Children’s Defense Fund

“Compassion, intelligence, and thought-provoking wisdom...A new vision for personal engagement with societal issues.” --Publishers Weekly (starred review)

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. What barriers to social involvement have you found, both in yourself and in others? What images does our culture present when describing citizens who act. What comes to your mind when you hear the term “social activist”?

2. “It takes energy to act,” says fisherman and environmental activist Pete Knutson. “But it’s more draining to bury your anger, convince yourself you’re powerless, and swallow whatever’s handed to you. The times I’ve compromised my integrity and accepted something I shouldn’t, the ghosts
of my choices have haunted me. When you get involved in something meaningful, you make your life count.” “When we shrink from the world,” writes Loeb, “our souls shrink, too.” Are there times when you’ve stayed silent over a “public” issue where you wanted to speak out? Did you feel a psychological cost from swallowing your convictions? Have you felt the sense of reclaiming your soul when you’ve begun to speak out?

3. When Virginia Ramirez begins to get involved, her husband tells her, “That’s not your role.” Have you ever been told that you shouldn’t do something because it’s not your “role” or place?

4. Garrison Keillor recently tried to honor Martin Luther King Day by explaining, “Rosa Parks wasn’t an activist. She was just a woman with her groceries who was tired.” What does it do to our sense of possibility to strip away the reality that Parks had worked 12 years with a local NAACP chapter before she ever took her famous stand? What else do we lose when we bury the history of citizen movements?

5. Consider this quote: “Contrary to expectation, we’re most effective when we realize that there is no perfect time to get involved in social causes, no ideal circumstances for voicing our convictions. What each of us faces instead is a lifelong series of imperfect moments in which we must decide what to stand for.” Has the “perfect standard” discouraged you from getting involved in your community? Or discouraged others who you wanted to enlist in community projects? What would it mean to willingly “live with ambiguity” in our political lives? How can we, as citizens, become “good-enough activists” who don’t demand perfection or certainty before we begin to take a stand?

6. When Los Angeles activist Suzy Marks hid behind her peace sign, did this evoke a familiar feeling for you? Have you ever felt like hiding and becoming invisible while trying to speak out?

7. Did you know about Maine’s Clean Elections initiative? What about Deborah Prothrow-Stith’s success in stopping youth violence in Boston, or Adam Werbach becoming national president of the Sierra Club at age 23? If you didn’t, this new knowledge give you hope? Are there ways we can work to get such important stories into common awareness?

8. “America’s prevailing culture of cynicism,” Loeb writes, “insists that nothing we do can matter. It teaches us not to get involved in shaping the world we’ll pass on to our children.” Do you agree with Loeb’s characterization of contemporary cynicism as a key corrosive force in our culture? Have you ever received “the cynical smirk” when you’ve tried to do something worthwhile? Or even when you’ve mentioned some issue you care about? Is there a way to question authority without becoming cynical?

9. Do the antidotes to cynicism presented through Loeb’s stories persuade you? That is, do you believe these ideas and examples could reduce cynicism in yourself and others you know?

10. Was Derrick Bell foolish to resign his tenured position at Harvard Law School? Can you think of other examples where people have paid a real cost for standing up for their beliefs, yet feel their actions were worth it?
11. What kind of results do you expect from social activism? What would help you do this work if the fruits of your efforts weren’t visible?

12. How is it different to take a stand for our own communities, like Virginia Ramirez, or to work in solidarity with someone else’s community, like Carol McNulty’s involvement challenging the sweatshop practices of the Gap?

13. How would you write your political autobiography? What stories would frame your life in terms of community involvement?

14. “Our most fundamental responsibility as citizens,” Loeb writes, “is to love not only our own children, but other people’s as well—including children we will never meet, who grow up in situations we’d prefer to ignore.” In other words, loving children is fundamental to our public lives and commitments. If you repeated this quote at your workplace, or to your neighbors, what kinds of responses would you receive?

15. Loeb suggests parents set models of community involvement or withdrawal for their children. What models did you get from your family? What do your children learn from your public involvements?

16. How have you balanced work, family, and community involvement? Who do you respect for successfully balancing all three?

17. Loeb quotes Harvard public policy professor Robert Putnam’s finding that over the past several decades more Americans have been bowling, while league bowling has steadily declined. More Americans now bowl in a typical year than vote in Congressional elections, but Americans are, in Putnam’s phrase “bowling alone,” instead of in groups. Should we be concerned about such statistics? Are we losing a sense of community? Have you encountered projects that help rebuild it?

18. Communities can also have their limits. Loeb entitles one of his sections, “Let’s not talk about the bad things.” Do you think many of us are afflicted with “misplaced politeness”? Do you find it hard to talk about critical public issues with people who aren’t already activists—like with your neighbors or co-workers?

19. What is the lesson in the story where the Stanford student says he hopes his grandchildren will get to volunteer in the same homeless shelter as he has? What relationship have you seen between one-on-one volunteering and systemic change? When does one become the other? Do you support both? To what extent? Does Loeb’s “politics of witness” offer a way to unite them?

20. What balance needs to exist between finding the initiative within yourself to combat apathy in your community and helping motivate others to join your cause?

21. Loeb describes participation in public life as “a process through which our personalities evolve” and argues that taking action is also an experiment in self-education, which helps us learn about ourselves through our own actions and those of others. What role should social action play in formal education? Should schools require students to become participants in public life and take part in social movements?
At what age is it a good idea to get kids involved in community issues? Should they be able to understand fully what they’re doing before they’re allowed to contribute on their own, or is any contribution, whether understood or not, a good start?

22. Have you ever been intimidated by the language or knowledge of people who are involved in activist causes? What would have made you feel more welcome? Or if you’re already involved, how could you reach out to people who feel too intimidated and hesitant to take the first step?

23. Loeb talks about the “necessary discomfort” in working with people who don’t agree with us or have widely differing experiences. Have you seen people with different political beliefs work together on a cause? Should the story of former Klu Klux Klansman C.P. Ellis give us hope?

24. Have you seen effective political efforts that successfully bridge race and class? Where have organizations that you’ve been involved with hit the limits of insularity?

25. Loeb discusses vulnerability and calls it both an asset and a limitation. He suggests there’s a fine line between being vulnerable enough to listen, ask for help, and accept that you don’t know everything, and being so vulnerable that you give up hope of being able to achieve anything. If a balance of vulnerability and confidence is required to be effective in public life, especially in a leadership position, how do you achieve the correct balance?

26. Have you ever been burned out while involved in a social cause? What about while participating in other community activities? Does fear of burnout hold you back from social involvement? How do we balance our larger commitments and our personal lives?

27. What can we learn from Hazel Wolf about keeping on for the long haul?

28. Loeb tells how his friend Jorge, a doctor who volunteered in Nicaragua, lost faith in his ability to make a difference. While believing in what he did, Jorge was overwhelmed because he could not address all areas of an issue at once. He says Jorge’s “pained silence exemplifies the predicament many formerly active people find themselves in today. They remain caring and compassionate, but they’ve lost faith in their voices.” Do you feel that if you cannot change everything at once, why bother? How do you maintain faith in your work and your ability to make a difference?

29. In the section We Never Celebrate Our Victories, Loeb states that, “Few of us are capable of taking on highly difficult tasks without being rewarded somehow. We need approval, gratitude, a feeling of accomplishment, some indication of success.” How can you help organizations you’re involved with allow people feel this reward and keep them involved? How can you learn to celebrate victories, even if they’re seemingly small?

30. Marian Wright Edelman writes, “We are going to have to develop a concept of enough at the top and the bottom.” What’s your vision of a just society? What would it take to achieve it? Is it more productive to focus on what’s wrong in our world, or on possible solutions? Can you learn to act without a hard and fast blueprint for the ideal society, but only a general “magnetic north”?
31. If the Bush administration is indeed moving backward on an array of critical environmental and social justice issues, despite even the ghost of a popular mandate, how should ordinary citizens respond? How should we respond to a president who lost the popular vote, then was enshrined by a Republican Supreme Court. Are any of the lessons from this book useful in breaking the silence that gives Bush’s administration the presumption of legitimacy?

32. What does Loeb mean by radical patience? How did Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Susan B. Anthony exemplify this? How can you relate this concept to the things that need changing?

33. How would you want to answer Rabbi Hillel’s question about how to live for more than just ourselves?

34. Sonya Tinsley, a young African-American activist in Atlanta, talks about “picking your team,” those who try to live their commitments, versus the team of the cynics. What are you hopeful about, and what motivates your hope?

About the Author