Christine Henseler should have become a set designer. Her first twenty years were spent drawing, painting, and making. She won prizes for posters in high school; she painted theater sets, and even wrote a short play. And because engineering is in her blood, she spends her time building, from wooden decks to transdisciplinary programs. So why did she become a professor of Spanish literature? Because some messages rarely change: she was told you can’t get a job in the arts. So she gained a degree in Spanish and journalism/advertising, and the rest is history. Or is it?

Life usually comes full circle. Christine now encourages students to study the arts and humanities; she expands young people’s understanding of career choices through websites such as The Arts and Humanities in the Twenty-first Century Workplace and guidebooks such as Arts and Humanities: Don’t Leave College without Them. In the hopes of reaching a broader audience and slowly reshaping national conversations, Christine codirects a public advocacy initiative known as 4Humanities and contributes to the Huffington Post and Inside Higher Ed. Her long-term hopes and dreams? To give more underserved youth the opportunity to build a meaningful and successful career with the arts and humanities.

Changing the Story

When tasked with compiling their personal stories into a book to be self-published on Amazon, the class I started to teach in the spring of 2018—Students
Call for Social Change—buzzed with excitement, one student so elated that she immediately texted her dad. The students couldn’t believe it. They would become published authors! They would write about an issue that was near and dear to their hearts, a “story of change” meant to inspire their friends, their communities, the next wave of changemakers.

The goal of the course was as exciting as it was urgent. Prospects of a climate apocalypse, the unavailability of basic public goods like drinking water, let alone social security and health care, are some of the many reasons our young adults are taking to the streets. They were literally marching for their lives, as was the motto of the student-led demonstration after the Parkland, Florida, shooting on Valentine’s Day, 2018 that left seventeen high school students dead.

Despite the power of such youth activism today, many young adults feel helpless, anxious, frustrated. They might march to the drum of these protests, but what can they really do in their everyday lives to affect social change?

That’s what I asked my students that first day of class in April 2018. My goal was to enhance students’ understanding of their place in this world and their agency to change their piece of the world. That is why the case studies we examined, the critical readings and film assignments, centered on young people making a difference in their everyday lives, in small ways, with persistence, belief, and compassion. Through books like Adam Braun’s *The Promise of a Pencil: How an Ordinary Person Can Create Extraordinary Change* (2014), and films like Nicole Nenhman’s *Revolutionary Optimists* (2013), Grant Baldwin’s *The Clean Bin Project* (2010), and *Living on One Dollar* (2013), by Chris Temple, Zach Ingrasci, and Sean Leonard, student sentiment began to shift from helpless uncertainty and frustration to feeling an inkling of individual agency.

Through intensive and constant workshopping of ideas and writings, students began to feel that they had the power to affect change by telling their own personal story. But grappling with a unique and personal issue that had significantly impacted their lives was no easy matter. And being in a traditional classroom was certainly not conducive to developing a more student-centered environment or to calling me “Christine” instead of “Prof. Henseler.” So every Wednesday, at 3:00 p.m., a Union College shuttle took us to an office building in downtown Schenectady called Urban Co-Works. It was a cool, industrial-looking space with walls made of glass. In this space I guided students through design-centered activities meant to expand their thinking about issues they felt were critical to their lives and to develop a
public narrative that joined their “Story of Self” with their “Story of Us” and “Story of Now,” an effective structure first developed by Marshall Ganz of Harvard University, then modified by Serena Zhang and Voop de Vulpillieres in their “Public Narrative Participant Guide.”

To further the publication of the book, I also asked students to select a team to write, edit, typeset, market, and design the manuscript, a task that was prone to frustration and difficult moments but representative of the title they chose for their introduction: “You Get Out What You Put In.” And what they ultimately got out was a book they titled Generation Now: Millennials Call for Social Change. They chose a price of $9.50 and decided to donate all proceeds to COCOA House, a youth after-school program in Schenectady, NY.

After the publication of the book, I was exhausted and drained, but I also felt fulfilled and deeply moved. I had never felt so intensely connected to my students, so affected by the deeply impactful experiences already marking their young lives, from domestic partnership abuse to suicide, from escaping a Hasidic community or rebelling against a Pakistani education to working with disabled kids or suffering through high school with an invisible illness. Yes, contrary to popular belief, these young adults had a lot to say.

The eighteen students’ fearless courage to speak about their most personal experiences led to strong emotions in the class, even tears. Their willingness to share personal stories through writing became a testament to their deep desire to be heard and to change their surroundings. It was an emotionally exhausting process for them—and for me. But in the end, this group convinced me that public storytelling could change the course of our lives and that the quote by James Baldwin at the top of my syllabus did indeed ring true: “You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can’t, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. . . . The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way . . . people look at reality, then you can change it” (quoted in Romano).

The course taught me a lesson that is universally applicable: to shift the way we function in this world, we must allow ourselves to be seen. Vulnerably seen. That’s what the students did in this class. By extension, they changed how I think of my work as a teacher and scholar. When I became a “scholar as human,” I learned about my own agency in the building of a more humanistic and holistic future. I also learned that we have much to gain from listening to and engaging the next generation of youth, because they
confront the social crisis that underlines our nation by seeking more humanity. It’s time we faculty, we in higher education, did the same.

So here goes. . .

I Wasn’t Always a Professor

When I was twenty, I ran. I did not run from a country or from an unbearable political climate. I ran from a messy parental divorce, from an emotionally abusive stepfather, and from a self that had been demoralized, stripped of a voice and made to feel worthless. Drugs or depression would have been a natural next step, my spouse repeatedly tells me, but I had something that was far more addictive and redeeming: reading, learning, and drawing. So instead I overdosed on natural curiosity and creative drive.

I was seventeen when my mother and I fled back to Germany from Spain, on a bus, one late night in the dark. We were scared. We hid out in a tiny studio apartment. Although just one room, it seemed a hundred times larger than the “golden cage” (as my mom and I used to call it) of the villa in Spain—with swimming pool and tennis court—that had imprisoned us for five years. Cages come in all shapes and forms, and the memory of this metaphorical cage and the courage to find my voice led me to today, to teaching the Call for Social Change class and helping empower my students to raise their voices.

Contrary to popular belief, I am an immigrant. I’m a non-native speaker of English. I come from a wealthy country. A middle-income home. I could never compare my alien past to that of the Central and South Americans, Syrians, or Afghanistanis now seeking refuge. I am blond. Tall. Light-skinned. German. I am not likely to be stopped, arrested, deported. And I can’t even imagine—as we all so vividly should—how it feels to be targeted, denounced, ripped from the wombs of those we love.

I am almost embarrassed to call myself an immigrant. My story seems trivial, elitist, even inappropriate in today’s political climate, especially given my current professional position. But I wasn’t always a professor. I didn’t always make a good living. I, like so many contributors to this volume, started at the bottom and arrived here to write this essay for a reason. My reason is that my story of hope, my American Dream—although quickly turning into a nightmare for some in today’s political climate—has significantly influenced how I look at the world and the meaning I seek through my work. My hope is to help young people today break out of their cages, whatever their shape or size.

They say that when one door closes another one opens, but what they don’t tell you is that some doors need WD-40; they take a while to open and
screech in the process. That’s how I felt when I learned that the high school degree I received in Spain—the *bachillerato*—would not allow me to attend a university in Germany. And with no German *Abitur*, and no money to speak of, my choices were limited. I had wanted to pursue graphic design, but with no art portfolio my dreams of going to an art academy also went up in smoke. I had no choice but to enter a retail sales apprenticeship that I never wanted or enjoyed. I took painting and French classes at night to make up for my boredom. But I had no mentor. No idea how to change my life, no resources either. I felt much like so many kids do today: wanting more but not knowing how to get there.

However, when I went through the German apprenticeship for two years I learned everything from sales to accounting, from packaging to fabric manufacturing. I worked, and I went to school. And this experience defined how I see the role of education today here in the United States. You see, although I am a college professor today, I do not believe that college should be the only path to follow. Let’s build diverse educational pathways to allow for diverse entries for individuals with diverse talents and interests. As in countries like Germany or Italy, solid apprenticeships, in any and all fields, afford respected professional opportunities in shoemaking, plumbing, carpentry, welding, or boat building. Now imagine an entire network of apprenticeships spanning the United States and providing our youth with respectful alternatives to technical schools or colleges. It’s about building meaningful lives, not following prescribed paths. And it is for this reason that when I advocate for the arts and humanities, I do so not in exception to (or rejection of) other models and programs of learning but in addition and in partnership.

As a naive twenty-year-old in 1989, I arrived in the United States to start my own life, in my own image. I felt lost, lacking funds, linguistically challenged, insecure and voiceless, culturally in-between, and overall unknowing of the US educational system. I took classes in art and design, but, not knowing about potential careers, I earned double majors in journalism and Spanish, with a minor in art history. I worked as a freelance graphic designer and photographer. And when I was offered the opportunity to teach—I was a senior undergraduate—I was both terrified and energized. And I got hooked. Thanks to wonderful mentors who believed in me, TA-ships and fellowships, a free ride through graduate school determined my fate as a professor of Spanish language and literature, sealed with a doctorate from Cornell University and a friendship with Debbie Castillo. Which leads me here today. Who would have thought...

There are more details to share. But what is important to know is that, yes, the moments that marked my young life’s path defined my life’s purpose
today: expanding young people’s understanding of what they can do with degrees in the arts and humanities; mentoring and supporting those who are making their way through difficult personal circumstances; pushing on the edges of the boxes and structures that are inhibiting creativity and leaving nontraditional voices out; advocating for more diverse educational pathways, making space for playful and creative problem-solving, believing in holistic and realistic practices that combine happiness with utility and deep learning; building bridges between people and fields and disciplines on and off campus to further engagement; and providing platforms for our youth that allow them to give voice to their perspectives and their opinions. Most important, I believe in facilitating more human communication and compassion, a need that, as this volume pronounces, is becoming ever more urgent, for young and old alike.

Finding Happiness in Our Growing Social Crisis

Mine might be a story set in a different place and time, but the truth is that the basic needs of young people today are relatively unchanging. All seek happiness, health, meaning, purpose, stability, safety, success. Love. What has changed is that this generation is having to find their purpose in a nation that desperately needs to find its own.

Rarely do we faculty members (or do our students) allow ourselves the time to connect or to reflect in this fast-paced society. Even in our courses we move from one assignment to the next, piling on the work, expecting ever more of our students and ourselves. We spend our days returning e-mails, writing reports, working to meet the ever-increasing demands of our scholarly output and our pedagogical needs, not to speak of our many service and leadership responsibilities. What are we losing in this fast-paced society? When I served as director of faculty development I heard consistently about the need for more time, the need for more human communication and human contact. Yes, the need to slow down the clock.

Our need to slow down reminds me of the emergence of the Slow Movement and its guiding principle “to step back from economic markers . . . and to examine what our behavior tells us about the connection between our beliefs and our actions” (45).² According to professor Guttorm Floistad, we need to remind ourselves that despite today’s sped-up rate of change “our basic needs never change,” and they include the need to be seen and appreciated, to belong, to be cared for, and to be loved. And to meet these needs, “we have to recover slowness, reflection, and togetherness” (quoted in Riddle, 45). It seems obvious, doesn’t it?
This notion of our unchanging basic human needs ought to be self-evident, but is not: we need reminding. In this capitalist consumer culture in which financial success is conducting plastic surgery on humanity, we, the citizens of this seemingly great country, are increasingly feeling anxious, frustrated, depressed, and angry. There is no time more ripe than today to remind ourselves of the powerful connection between macro-level politics and everyday well-being and happiness.

It is also no coincidence that the happiness factor in the United States has been steadily dropping, down to 19 among over 150 countries studied in the 2019 World Happiness Report. Researchers found that in the case of the United States, although its “income per capita has been increasing, several of the determinants of well-being have been in decline, as witnessed in the increased numbers of people suffering under depression, obesity, and opioid addiction” (Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs).

Study after study concludes that countries with the happiest citizens are not necessarily the richest nations. They are those “with a more balanced set of social and institutional supports for better lives” (Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs). But the United States, they found, suffers under weakening social support networks, the perceptions of corruption in government and business, and waning confidence in public institutions. Is it any wonder that, according to a study in 2017 conducted by the nonprofit Mental Health America (MHA), mental health in youth and adults is worsening, yet the United States suffers under a mental health workforce shortage?

The United States does not lack the means to address this and other shortages, but this country continues to suffer under a political system that fails “to address and understand America’s growing social crisis” (World Happiness). How ironic, and how out of touch, that our politicians still call this the greatest country in the world. Let’s call this country what it is: a country in a deep social crisis.

The social crisis of the United States manifests itself in everyday life in ways that we all recognize. It seems that on a daily basis we shake our heads in disbelief or say: “you’ve got to be kidding me,” not to speak of the very real emotions of frustration, anxiety, and anger that destabilize our well-being. The good news, if one can call it that, is that precisely because our political systems are failing us, our troubles are staring glaringly into our faces. It is like being confronted by our own poor health, a stark reminder that we have to change the way we eat and the way we live, and we need to tell each other how much we care. Yes, we can call getting in touch with our emotions “soft” (as we do of the humanities), but from my experience, this is the hardest work any of us can do. And the most valuable.
CHAPTER 7

Millennials and the Rise of the Everyday Changemaker

Our young people are suffering. They are living through this social crisis at a time in their lives when they are just waking up to the world, a world whose horrors are exponentially broadcast on their social media channels every day. The twenties and thirties are when students are trying to grow into healthy adults who balance personal discovery and well-being with professional path-making and -breaking. So while “64% of Millennials say it’s a priority for them to make the world a better place” (Asgar), they are doing so at a time when every aspect of this acute social crisis is affecting their lives. The stories are many. The truths are right at hand. And by extension, the feeling of confusion and helplessness is constant (with anxiety levels at an all-time high). My students said it best in the introduction to their book:

Millennials: a generation that was born and raised in an era of information and global communications, where even the smallest injustice, in the smallest town, in the smallest country, triggers a call for respect. In our day, everything is relevant and everyone deserves attention. Everyone is expected to know everything. Anything is possible, ironically making new discoveries seem impossible. So how can we care about everything when we have an almost overwhelming amount of information at our fingertips? How can we make an impact in this world if every time we tackle one issue, another one seems to arise? (Union College Changemakers 1)

This overwhelming sense of helplessness that our young people, and all of us really, feel is making many reevaluate their priorities. Finding humanity through a more balanced lifestyle is of utmost importance to this generation willing to give up higher salaries or create alternative employment opportunities to either be their own bosses or work in a more collaborative, supportive environment with flexible schedules and the opportunity to achieve purposeful work-life integration. This is not the same as work-life balance, since it defines the healthy level of control Millennials wish to have over their lives through flexible hours, freedom to work in different spaces, outdoor time to chat with colleagues, and the opportunity to make decisions on all levels of the company (Robinson). And if you think their wishes are nice pipe dreams out of touch with reality, think again, because “86 million millennials will be in the workplace by 2020—representing a full 40% of the total working population” (Asgar). Change is forthcoming, like it or not.

In Cause for Change: The Why and How of Nonprofit Millennial Engagement, authors Kari Dunn Saratovsky and Derrick Feldman underscore the need
for our organizations to adapt to the more human-centric interests of the Millennials. What drives Millennials, they explain, “even more than technology and social media are the personal relationships and human connections they forge along the way” (14). Attention to social causes, volunteering, and “making the world a better place” are driving motivators of this highly diverse and global generation interested in collaborating and, most importantly, building their “own system, on their own terms” and enthusiastically bringing along others who share the same vision (xv–xvi).

Individual agency to affect concrete change “on their own terms,” is an attractive proposition in this political climate, which is the reason why the “everyday changemaker” concept has become such a driving force. The overarching idea has been most notably expressed by former president Barack Obama when he said: “I am asking you to believe. Not in my ability to bring about change—but in yours.” It has also been popularized by social entrepreneur and founder of Ashoka, Bill Drayton—“Everyone a Changemaker”—to point to the agency of all, but especially our young people, to build a more civic-minded and caring world. As New York Times columnist David Brooks highlights in a conversation with Drayton in February of 2018, “Social transformation flows from personal transformation. You change the world when you hold up a new and more attractive way to live. And Drayton wants to make universal a quality many people don’t even see: agency.”

But claiming our own agency does not come easy to any of us, young or old. It’s a messy process that demands that we connect what we feel inside with our place in the world. As Doris Sommer in her fascinating book The Work of Art in the World thoughtfully expresses: “The appropriate question about agency is not if we exercise it, but how intentionally we do so, to what end, and what effect” (4). She believes agency to be “a modest but relentless call to creative action, one small step at a time,” living somewhere “between frustrated fantasies and paralyzing despair” (4). Her words readily speak to the experience of my students, who admitted that, “this book did not come together flawlessly. We faced obstacles, large and small, every day. It was those obstacles that helped us learn, and without which we would have produced a very different book. Combining 18 brains is easier said than done. It was inevitable that when communicating our different ideas, we were bound to bump heads, but it was those bumps that shaped the book and made it that much more authentic” (Union College Changemakers 3).

Agency demands the inclusion of more humanity, and humanity comes with uncertainty, failure, frustration, and often organically emerging discoveries and, yes, the unknown. That’s why it is high time that we as scholars, and the organizations and associations that support our work, embrace our
humanity and make space for the personal and the organic in our conversations, in our projects, and in our grant applications. With trust. Because when we can include play, laughter, creativity, compassion, authenticity, and honesty into our scholarship, our engagements can gain in personal and communal agency. It’s what Drayton conveys as the holding up of a new and more attractive way to live. Is it all rosy? Definitely not. But who ever said that becoming human was easy?

**Making It Personal**

That’s where we faculty members come in. Although not exclusively, those of us working in or at the intersection of the arts and humanities have influential roles to play at this moment in history. We are well-versed in the critical art of analytical self-reflection, the art of expression across all mediums, ethical and logical thinking, and the building of cognitive empathy, which is “the ability to perceive how people are feeling in evolving circumstances” (Brooks). We don’t need to stretch the imagination to connect the qualities of our disciplines in the arts and humanities with the “evolving circumstances” of the next generation, namely with meaningful everyday change that is born from a critical understanding of changing social structures and narratives, reshaped into their own image, on their own terms, in their own languages.

But who are the Millennials in “their own image”? One telling identity marker is that “to a degree not seen in any previous generation, Millennials see themselves in the shoes of others who don’t look like them, speak the same language, have the same education or come from the same background, perhaps because of their high level of diversity” (Case Foundation). Therefore, when the personal stories of my students began to emerge through genuine engagements with each other’s topics, from education to immigration and the environment, that’s when this seemingly homogenous student body began to expose their deep-seated and diverse life circumstances. Students came from black, brown, and white upper-, middle- and lower-class backgrounds. The group included Japanese, Tibetan, Haitian, and Pakistani Americans, first-generation immigrants and students living between two countries, gay and lesbian students, individuals affected by sexual abuse and long-term health afflictions and disease, liberals and conservatives, and even a royal—yes, we had a real live prince among us (and I dare you to read the book and figure out who it is).

In essence, as scientist Brené Brown expressed in her TED talk “On the Power of Vulnerability,” when we let ourselves “be seen, deeply seen,
vulnerably seen,” that’s when we can recognize our human potential in each other and ourselves. Here’s how my students described their travails:

Throughout this journey, each one of us Millennial changemakers went through our own process. We quickly realized the gargantuan task we were taking on. It would not be easy and we each grappled with this challenge in our own way. For some, choosing which movement they were passionate about seemed impossible. For others, it was coping with trauma or hardship and having the courage to share that story. We were reminded that our voices matter and that our generation has the capacity to ignite that change that we all desperately wish to see (Union College Changemakers, 3).

The students that got the most out of my class spent hours finding the changemaker within themselves: “We researched issues that mattered to us, and we wrote a story of change about the communities we so care about. It was when we stumbled upon obstacles in the creation of our social change narration, that we were reminded: our voices matter. Our generation has the capacity to ignite that change that we all desperately wish to see. And we knew that if we didn’t throw ourselves into this opportunity for our voices to be heard, nobody else would” (Osterholz and Paneth, et al.)

“Nobody else would.” That’s a powerful assertion. Much like the ways in which our young are reacting to the social crisis of this nation, seeking happiness and well-being in more integrative work-life environments and reshaping the future in their own image, so can those of us faculty and administrators working in higher education. We must look beyond the structures that are no longer serving the good of our youth, or of us. We built them. We can change them. We can expand them. We can reshape them.

We must continue to ask ourselves: Which voices do our current structures and conversations favor? Which individuals are falling through the cracks? What ideas are stuck in the middle, with nowhere to go? In what ways are we limiting ourselves to traditional ways of thinking and doing that are out of line with today’s needs? Where is the place for creativity, humanity, and happiness in all that we do? What is our purpose?

I do not consider these questions, this call to action, a rosy, theoretical exercise. Doris Sommer reminds us that, “It won’t do to indulge in romantic dreams about art remaking the world. Nor does it make sense to stop dreaming altogether and stay stuck in cynicism” (4). It’s time we claim our own agency in the remaking of the social good that the arts and humanities can promote as they interact with and in the world. And it’s time we work with the next generations to affect everyday social change. As articulated by
Saratovsky and Feldman, involving Millennials, who comprise most young professionals in all fields and disciplines, is key to several aspects needed for the health and well-being of our shared arts and humanities. Their involvement will:

- connect our scholarly and civic engagement work in the arts and humanities from perspectives and through linguistic and visual registers and platforms that are not only our own.
- change top-down advocacy and educational approaches for more participatory and peer-to-peer engagements.
- engage more diverse voices and visions in new and surprising or unusual spaces.
- support the professional development of our next generation of artists and humanists and, by extension, build new leadership into our organizations.
- develop applied or solution-based environments that speak to the interests and passions of the next generation.
- make it personal by taking more organic and playful approaches that allow for individual vulnerability and connection-building.

If we want to find humanity in this growing social crisis, then we also need to do our part; we need to show the way, with the next generation by our side. Yes, we need to “make it personal”—because what we claim to be a crisis of the arts and humanities is only a crisis insofar as it reflects the larger malaise affecting our nation. As such, we must not only point to the obvious, the present connection between the arts and humanities to sustain and maintain our common good, but we must also question our own role in the building of a healthy future, for ourselves, for our kids, for this nation.

Being a “scholar as human,” then, is a necessity. It is time we rebuild our “own system, on [our] own terms” and enthusiastically bring along others who share the same vision. If we don’t, who will?

**Epilogue**

It was the middle of June 2018, when the Call for Social Change class had already ended. I was finalizing the book manuscript. I was editing and typesetting when I noticed a section I didn’t recognize. It was titled “For Christine.” Where did that come from? I started reading. My eyes welled up with tears. The students had written notes of thanks, expressing how much the
course had meant to them. They felt transformed. They had learned to see themselves as agents of change. To see each other, authentically. To connect to each other on a human level, in ways they had never done before. I read on and on, and I began to sob. I sobbed so deeply, for so long. I knew right then that this was the kind of work I wanted to pursue from now on. I became viscerally aware of the transformative power of working with purpose. And I vowed to keep the tears flowing. Because we all need to dig a little deeper to find and share a bit more of our humanity.

Notes

3. MHA’s “2017 State of Mental Health and America” reports that one in five adults has a mental health condition (“that’s over 40 million Americans; more than the populations of New York and Florida combined), that youth mental health is worsening (“rates of youth with severe depression increased from 5.9% in 2012 to 8.2% in 2015” and “even with severe depression, 63% of youth are left with no or insufficient treatment”), and that here is “a serious mental health workforce shortage.” Mental Health America, http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/issues/2017-state-mental-health-america-report-overview-historical-data#Key.

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