

Power Dynamics in Service

Facilitator's Guide for Common Book Discussion on Story

This guide should take approximately 45 minutes as developed here and is appropriate for groups reading *The Heart and the Fist*. Please adapt freely as you need.

Student Learning Objectives

- Students will explore power dynamics in service and reflect on how this may impact their service experiences.
- Students will identify power dynamics in the Common Book, *Heart and the Fist*.

Instructions

The guide below provides a set of discussion items designed to initiate a class conversation. In large classes it may be useful to break into small groups so that everyone has a chance to contribute. You may also consider using e-polling or other uses of technology to encourage participation in an anonymous format to get the conversation started.

Exploring Power Dynamics in Service

Student Guide

Invitation to Students

Today we are going to use Ivan Illich's famous speech, "[To Hell with Good Intentions](#)" to discuss the role of Power Dynamics in Service. Ivan Illich, an Austrian philosopher and Roman Catholic priest, addressed this speech to the Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects in Cuernavaca, Mexico on April 20, 1968. The speech should be viewed in the historical context of 1968 when it was delivered. Below are several quotes from his speech.

- “Your reports about your work in Mexico...exude self-complacency. Your reports on past summers prove that you are not even capable of understanding that your do-gooding in a Mexican village is even less relevant than it would be in a U.S. ghetto. Not only is there a gulf between what you have and what others have which is much greater than the one existing between you and the poor in your own country, but there is also a gulf between what you feel and what the Mexican people feel that is incomparably greater. This gulf is so great that in a Mexican village you, as White Americans (or cultural White Americans) can imagine yourselves exactly the way a white preacher saw himself when he offered his life preaching to the black slaves on a plantation in Alabama.”
- “There is no way for you to really meet with the underprivileged since there is no common ground whatsoever for you to meet on.”
- “If you insist on working with the poor, if this is your vocation, then at least work among the poor who can tell you to go to hell. It is incredibly unfair for you to impose yourselves on a village where you are so linguistically deaf and dumb that you don't even understand what you are doing or what people think of you.“
- “I am here to suggest that you voluntarily renounce exercising the power which being an American gives you...I am here to challenge you to recognize your inability, your powerlessness and your capacity to do the “good” which you intended to do.”

Discussion of Illich's speech:

- What are your reactions to these quotes (this article)? What do you feel as you read it?
- Why might Illich have this point of view towards power dynamics in service? What might have influenced his perspective?
- What assumptions does Illich make about Americans who are serving abroad?
- How would you imagine service to be different in the US or abroad? If you have had specific experience doing service in the US or abroad how were those experiences different for you?
- How would you defend the decision of doing service in a country (or even culture) other than your own?

Discussion: Use Illich's speech to critically reflect on the Common Book, *The Heart and the Fist* using the excerpts below and your recollection of the narrative.

Chapter on Rwanda: "These women had suffered more than I could have ever imagined, and they still were willing to welcome me, to talk with me. After all the betrayal they had lived through, all the hardship, they were still willing to trust a stranger. If people can live through genocide and retain compassion, if they can take strength from pain, if they are able, still, to laugh, then certainly we can learn something from them" (p 73-74).

Chapter on Bolivia: "As I walked home that night, I found myself breathing shallow in and out of my nose like I was preparing to fight. What's the matter with me? At first I thought I was angry about street children, angry about their lives. But soon I realized that my anger was selfish. I wanted to see...cause for hope. I wanted to believe that these children's situations could be improved, lives saved, wounds healed. But I didn't see any hope on these streets" (p95).

Chapter on Kenya: "I thought buying at the local market would be an excellent way to build positive relationships with the local villagers...We shook hands with people. As we picked through the fruit stalls, the villagers – who had previously only seen us driving back and forth with our sunglasses on, windows rolled up, rifles in our hands – asked us questions" (p 267-8).

Chapter on Iraq: "We would never be able to control Iraq on our own. We did not speak the language. We did not know the culture. If we were ever going to achieve victory, we had to involve the Iraqis in the business of capturing and killing al Qaeda and protecting their own cities" (p 272).

- What are the motivation for Grietens' service? How does his motivation change over time?
- How would Grietens respond to Illich's claim that we should take responsibility for what is happening in the US before we take responsibility for the world?
- Who benefitted most from Grietens' presence abroad (Grietens or the people he was serving)?
- How would Grietens justify his time abroad?