



## PUSHED OFF THE FENCE

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I SOMETIMES jokingly tell my students “you’re going to get sore if you spend too much time sitting on the fence.”

Choosing a career in social work means being willing to take a stand on behalf of those who are vulnerable or marginalized. I couldn’t teach this, of course, if I wasn’t willing to take a stand myself.

I used to be a soother, avoiding conflict and rarely sticking my neck out. I was a fence-sitter. But all that changed in my first year as a graduate student in social work in the fall of 1989. I took three introductory courses that semester, but it was events outside the classroom that really pushed me off the fence.

One morning before class, I was somewhat startled to see the spoils of a “panty raid” displayed in the dining hall. I didn’t think much of about it at the time. Later that morning, however, one of my professors stalked into class in a smoldering rage. She tried to begin, sputtered, tried again, and finally gave up. Then she declared, “I can’t just sit here and lead this class as if everything is normal. Did you see that stuff? We shouldn’t have to tolerate this kind of degradation and humiliation against women!” The next thing I knew, our class was marching across campus towards the dining hall.

Our enraged professor, followed by some of my classmates, climbed up on tables and began tearing down the panty raid posters. Some undergraduate students began to protest. I became increasingly uncomfortable with the situation and started mumbling jokes with three or four other men, trying to distance myself from my “radical” classmates. Later, I was furious at being manipulated by our professor. But eventually I began to realize that actually I was angry because I had chickened out when confronted with a chance to act on what I believed.

The next morning the dining hall was festooned with the retaliatory trophies of the women who had raided the men’s residences. The women

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had managed to exceed the level of degradation with explicit symbols and slogans belittling men and their sexuality. This time I couldn't just sit by. Three or four other classmates joined me in tearing down the posters and stuffing them in trash cans. Several beefy male undergraduate students began to bully us, demanding that we mind our own business and leave the posters alone. They even called in security guards, who threatened to arrest us for vandalizing university property.

Our actions set off a widening circle of events, including protests on campus, heated exchanges between student groups, and even national media coverage. Eventually, administrators, under the pressure of embarrassing revelations that the university had informally sanctioned the panty raids, accepted responsibility, and also established a women's center on campus.

Though I was only one small part of these larger developments, I now recognize that these events nudged me off the fence. I am still somewhat hesitant to be confrontational. And of course some may credibly argue that during that campus crisis there may have been other, better ways to achieve the same result than by open confrontation. But I also believe that God used those events in my life as a catalyst to disciple me into a person who would take initiative to work for respect and justice and decency. He taught me to be willing to get off the fence.

**Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. Psalm 82: 3, 4 NIV**

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