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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Changing the World

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

One of the most cherished items in my possession is a postcard that was sent from Mississippi to the Upper West Side of Manhattan in June 1964.

“Dear Mom and Dad,” it says, “I have arrived safely in Meridian, Mississippi. This is a wonderful town and the weather is fine. I wish you were here. The people in this city are wonderful and our reception was very good. All my love, Andy.”

That was the last word sent to his family by Andrew Goodman, a 20-year-old college student who was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan, along with fellow civil rights workers Michael Schwerner and James Chaney, on his first full day in Mississippi — June 21, the same date as the postmark on the card. The goal of the three young men had been to help register blacks to vote.

The postcard was given to me by Andrew’s brother, David, who has become a good friend.

Andrew and that postcard came to mind over the weekend as I was thinking about the sense of helplessness so many ordinary Americans have been feeling as the nation is confronted with one enormous, seemingly intractable problem after another. The helplessness is beginning to border on paralysis. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, nearly a decade long, are going badly, and there is no endgame in sight.

Monday morning’s coffee was accompanied by stories about [suicide bombings in the heart of Baghdad](#) that killed at least 150 people and wounded more than 500 and [helicopter crashes in Afghanistan](#) that killed 14 Americans.

Here at home, the terrible toll from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression continues, with no end to the joblessness in sight and no comprehensible plans for fashioning a healthy economy for the years ahead. The government’s finances resemble a Ponzi scheme. If you want to see the epidemic that is really clobbering American families, look past the H1N1 virus to the home foreclosure crisis.

The Times ran a Page A1 [article on Monday that said](#) layoffs, foreclosures and other problems associated with the recession had resulted in big increases in the number of runaway children, many of whom were living in dangerous conditions in the streets.

Americans have tended to watch with a remarkable (I think frightening) degree of passivity as crises of all sorts have gripped the country and sent millions of lives into tailspins. Where people once might have deluged their elected representatives with complaints, joined unions, resisted mass firings, confronted their employers with serious demands, marched for social justice and created brand new civic organizations to

fight for the things they believed in, the tendency now is to assume that there is little or nothing ordinary individuals can do about the conditions that plague them.

This is so wrong. It is the kind of thinking that would have stopped the civil rights movement in its tracks, that would have kept women in the kitchen or the steno pool, that would have prevented labor unions from forcing open the doors that led to the creation of a vast middle class.

This passivity and sense of helplessness most likely stems from the refusal of so many Americans over the past few decades to acknowledge any sense of personal responsibility for the policies and choices that have led the country into such a dismal state of affairs, and to turn their backs on any real obligation to help others who were struggling.

Those chickens have come home to roost. Being an American has become a spectator sport. Most Americans watch the news the way you'd watch a ballgame, or a long-running television series, believing that they have no more control over important real-life events than a viewer would have over a coach's strategy or a script for "Law & Order."

With that kind of attitude, Andrew Goodman would never have left the comfort of his family home in Manhattan. Rosa Parks would have gotten up and given her seat to a white person, and the Montgomery bus boycott would never have happened. Betty Friedan would never have written "The Feminine Mystique."

The nation's political leaders and their corporate puppet masters have fouled this nation up to a fare-thee-well. We will not be pulled from the morass without a big effort from an active citizenry, and that means a citizenry fired with a sense of mission and the belief that their actions, in concert with others, can make a profound difference.

It can start with just a few small steps. Mrs. Parks helped transform a nation by refusing to budge from her seat. Maybe you want to speak up publicly about an important issue, or host a house party, or perhaps arrange a meeting of soon-to-be dismissed employees, or parents at a troubled school.

It's a risk, sure. But the need is great, and that's how you change the world.

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