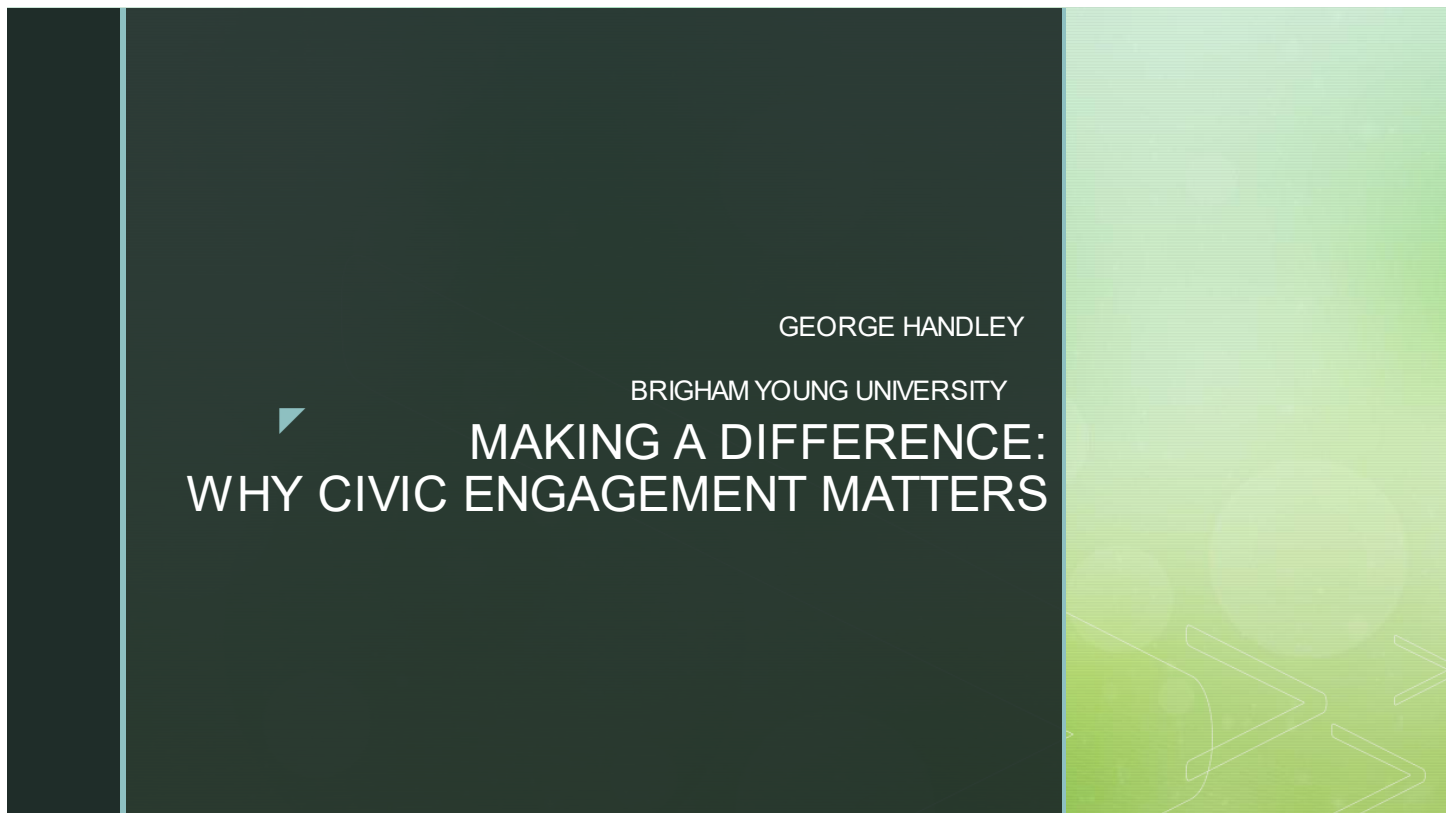


**George Handley's Introductory Remarks**  
**ASLE Public Writing and Civic Engagement Workshop**  
**January 29, 2021**



You may recall that Marilynne Robinson, the author of the recent novel *Jack* and of *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, among others, was interviewed by President Obama in the final months of his presidency. It was a remarkable moment. This wasn't a novelist and essayist, one who has written extensively about our many social ills, interviewing a sitting president. It was a sitting president interviewing a living novelist, one whom President Obama had admired for many years. I had the fortune to interview Marilynne Robinson a few months later, and in that interview she revealed that they had been corresponding for years. Apparently he felt that there was something to learn about governing and the meaning of America from fiction.

This is what he said:

"Are you somebody who worries about people not reading novels anymore? And do you think that has an impact on the culture? When I think about how I understand my role as citizen, setting aside being president, and the most important set of understandings that I bring to that position of citizen, the most important stuff I've learned I think I've learned from novels. It has to do with empathy. It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of grays, but there's still truth there to be found, and that you have to strive for that and work for that. And the notion that it's possible to connect with some[one] else even though they're very different from you."

## PRESIDENT OBAMA TO MARILYNNE ROBINSON:

“Are you somebody who worries about people not reading novels anymore? And do you think that has an impact on the culture? When I think about how I understand my role as citizen, setting aside being president, and the most important set of understandings that I bring to that position of citizen, *the most important stuff I’ve learned I think I’ve learned from novels. It has to do with empathy.* It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of grays, but there’s still truth there to be found, and that you have to strive for that and work for that. And the notion that it’s possible to connect with some[one] else even though they’re very different from you.”

--The New York Review of Books, Nov. 5, 2015 issue

I don’t think I need to persuade anyone here that we are worse off today—in many ways obviously—but to the particular subject at hand, we as teachers in the humanities have less standing, less public trust, and students and the public are reading less. The humanities generally and literature in particular are less relevant and more needed than at any time in my lifetime.

I recently corresponded with Robinson to congratulate her for her new novel. In the letter I sent I mentioned that since I had interviewed her in early 2016, I made the foolhardy decision to run for public office and that I was elected as a city council member in Provo, starting in January 2018. I recounted to her that I and my fellow councilors had grown exasperated that as the new semester approached and 70,000 students were about to descend upon our city and our immediate neighbor city to the north in a matter of weeks, we saw no plan from our governor, our county leadership, nor even from our Mayor. Knowing we were likely to see a significant spike of infections in a short time, we decided to take things into our own hands and passed a mask mandate just as the semester was about to begin. While we were supported by a majority of the population, we received an avalanche of hate-filled emails that called us everything from idiots to enemies of the state, from nazis to fascists, from satanists to enemies of freedom. It was an experience like nothing else I had experienced and made me truly horrified and scared for my community and for my country. I couldn’t find a way to respond productively.

When I shared this experience with Robinson, she wrote back and said something that has stuck with me ever since. She wrote: “it is a blow to find out that so many people are so ready to give themselves up to hatred and rage. I would never have believed it. Trump is a factor, but this had to pre-exist in the population. As an erstwhile teacher, I have to accept that something has gone wrong in the way we have been educating people at every level.”



## MARILYNNE ROBINSON:

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--Email to George Handley, Nov. 16, 2020

