

THE TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATION

A Sermon Delivered at the
First Unitarian Society of Newton
Sunday, May 4, 2008
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First, let me say how grateful I am to First Unitarian Society of Newton for inviting those of us from Needham to share worship with you this morning. All year long, as our building undergoes renovation and expansion, we have been holding most of our services at the synagogue in Needham that 55 years ago had its first services in our meetinghouse. But today our Jewish friends are observing one of those high holidays that is shared by congregations of every faith: the Spring rummage sale! So thanks for taking us in!

It's quite serendipitous, almost uncannily so, that we should coming together today to celebrate our collaboration in the Channing School Project. Because today is a kind of UU saint's the birthday of Horace Mann, born May 4, 1796, and a charter member of this congregation, celebrated in your "Education" window, the last on my left. And, as we heard in the announcements, we gather in building built on the site of the first teacher training academy in Massachusetts. Mann gave up his post as President of the Massachusetts Senate, and a political career that almost surely would have made him either Governor or a US Senator, in order to devote himself to making free, universal, public education available throughout Massachusetts. Heading the first statewide Board of Education in the country, starting in 1837, this remarkable member of William Ellery Channing's congregation, now often hailed as "the father of American public education," was a stalwart advocate for the transformation of a haphazard patchwork of inequitable and often brutal local schools, many of them closed to students from poor families who could not afford the fees, into a state-wide system that discouraged corporal punishment, encouraged teacher training, banned sectarian religion, yet promoted character development, and, above all, saw in every child a potential asset to the common future, worthy of our shared investment of education and concern.

In this Horace Mann was inspired by the theology of his minister, Dr. Channing, who, despite a Puritan heritage that depicted human nature as sinful and totally depraved, restored the ancient insight that each of us is also made in the image of God, and therefore full of potential for good and for compassion. At the heart of their liberal faith was a radical transformation in thinking that produced not only school reform, but also the drive to abolish slavery and to promote women's equality, among other causes.

I spent one year as a public school teacher. This was forty years ago this coming fall, when I was brand-new graduate of Harvard College. Here in Massachusetts. And, as I often say, it was my experience of the challenges of public school teaching that soon drove me to religion! But in the case of Horace Mann and Channing, it was instead religion that drove them to advocate for the transformation of public education. Not that they wanted to proselytize; not at all. But each had had early experiences that shaped their devotion to what we'd today call 'the inherent worth and dignity' of every child.

Channing grew up in Newport, Rhode Island, within sight of docks where slaves from Africa were unloaded and sold. When he graduated from Harvard, he felt he was still too young to be a minister, so he became a teacher – on the plantation of the Randolph family of Virginia, where he taught the master's children, while slave children were forbidden to learn to read! Horace Mann grew up in Franklin, Massachusetts. When he was still a boy, an older brother, skating on a pond one winter Sunday, fell through the ice and drowned. The local Calvinist minister declared at the boy's funeral that he had gone straight to hell, a sinner, skating on the Sabbath! Horace's family became Universalists. They couldn't afford to send him to a high school, but he took enough advantage of the local library Benjamin Franklin had provided when the town named itself for him that he won a scholarship to Brown in Providence, where he courted and married the daughter of the President of the college. Starting out as a young lawyer in Dedham, the first town in the Commonwealth to have a free, tax-supported school, he served on the school committee. As Dr. Channing did in Boston; which is why a school in Hyde Park is named for him.

Dr. Dancy has read what Channing wrote on education. And not just the familiar words in our hymnal, about how "the great end" is "not to burden the memory, but to quicken

and strengthen the power of thought”; “not to give them a definite amount of knowledge but to inspire a fervent love of truth”; “not to form an outward regularity, but to touch inward springs”; “not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own.” And when she first contacted the UUA, it was with the hope just of obtaining a decent portrait of Channing to hang in the front hall of the school.

But I had done partnerships with public schools previously. When I served All Souls in New York City, that congregation was asked by the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, led by a parishioner, to partner with P.S. 151 – the Eleanor Roosevelt School. Located directly across the street from a public housing project full of new Americans from 22 different countries and languages, that school also had a fine, dynamic principal. But she needed help crossing the language barriers and communicating with parents. So the first thing we did was to throw a huge American Thanksgiving dinner, with everyone seated by language groups, until we could identify bilingual parent leaders. Then we offered classroom volunteers, started an after-school program, strengthened the library, and provided extra resources to the teachers and staff. And we as a congregation were transformed by getting involved with public education.

Now it’s happening again at the Channing School. Where Dr. Dancy has identified over eighty children who have no one at home to help with their English language acquisition and skills. So Rev. Lloyd, supported by a grant from the Unitarian Universalist Fund for Social Responsibility, has recruited some twenty lay volunteers from five UU churches – the two gathered here, plus First Church in Boston, First Parish in Dedham, and First Parish in Milton – to give two hours a week as classroom volunteers, helping children, or assisting in some other way.

And why do we do this? And hope to expand this partnership in the years ahead? Because it’s no secret that American public education is today in almost as much of a crisis as it was in the time of Dr. Channing and Horace Mann. Last week saw the 25th anniversary of the noted report by President Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education, called *A Nation at Risk*. It began, “the educational foundations of our society are

presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people.” Where some, including the President, were calling for a return of official prayer in schools, and the abolition of the Federal Department of Education, the Commission defended keeping religion per se out of concern for character and standards, and insisted that the Federal government has an essential role in “helping meet the needs of key groups of students, such as the gifted and talented, the socio-economically disadvantaged, minority and language minority students, and the handicapped.” It called for longer school days, longer school years, and greater Federal funding. Instead, of course, the trend has been toward more and more testing and under-funded mandates, while entirely too many children are left behind -- despite the attempt of our government today shamelessly to steal a phrase from a true children’s advocate, Marian Wright Edelman, and then to distort it!

It’s not unlike the growing gap in our economics between “the haves and the have-nots.” In wealthier, more privileged communities, schools are well-resourced, even – dare I say it here in Newton? – rather elaborate in their amenities.

Meanwhile, in urban and poorer school systems, resources are clearly insufficient to meet the many challenges. This is what Jonathan Kozol has called “The Shame of the Nation.” These *Savage Inequalities*, to use another phrase of his, do put us “at risk,” not only competitively, but also morally. Because without more efforts to bridge the gap, we end up with what he has also aptly called “apartheid” in American public education, and an opportunity gap that condemns too many poor children to social dead ends while it encourages too many privileged children to take the educational advantages they enjoy for granted -- while the pain of the hyper-competitive existence we expect of them emerges in substance abuse, anorexia, and high suicide rates.

People, parents, let’s wake up! Before it’s too late! This enormous disparity in education and culture has costs at both ends of the economic spectrum! It’s time that we expose our children, especially our teenagers, more fully to the lives of young people right here in their own metropolitan area who have none of their advantages. And it’s time that more of us step up to the challenge of helping good schools like Channing realize the inherent

potential and worth of every child – even if that child’s parent can’t yet read English, or can’t find the time after working two jobs just to feed that child, to help with homework.

Marian Wright Edelman is right to ask us to pray for the children - for all of our children: for the well-nourished, and for those who get off the school bus too late to get subsidized breakfast; for the hyperactive ones, and for those who are too depressed to be too active; for the gifted, that they may use their gifts well and find them appreciated; and for those with special needs, that they may find those needs met, and their own worth valued; and for teachers, and administrators, and parents, who often need more support from other citizens than our customary way of organizing life allows for.

We are people who have experienced, and who place a great faith in the transformational power of education. May our engagement with the needs of education today also transform us, and make us justice seekers, practitioners of compassion, walking humbly in communities where we begin as strangers but end as friends, transformed by the encounter. Amen, and amen.

*Hymn 158

Praise the Source of Faith and Learning

Troeger/Albright

Benediction

May the Source of Faith and Learning now bless us on our way.

May its light eternal shine upon us and illumine the paths we walk.

May it shine out also from within us,

making a way for the young to follow,

and warming the hearts of others with compassion,

until the world of justice and peace we envision is realized for all God’s children.

Go in peace now, to serve and transform, to learn and be transformed. Amen.

Marian Wright Edelman, Beacon author, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, writes:

“What are our prayers for the future if not prayers for the children? Our care for our children and for the promise of their lives is as natural to us as breathing. This bond and commitment is in our blood and bones; it is hidden in the seeds deep within our bodies. It is the covenant of our species: to protect and nurture our young and to prepare a good way for them. We of the living generations are here only because our ancestors remained loyal to this covenant.

“So it is agonizing for us to acknowledge the failures we see in modern society's broken covenant with future generations. Never have we pushed so many children on to the tumultuous sea of life without the life vests of nurturing families and communities, caring schools, challenged minds, job prospects and hope.”

And yet one Grade Three girl at the William Ellery Channing School recently wrote:

“Who are we? Who are we? We are your future. We are your future. We are your future doctors, lawyers, politicians, teachers and entertainers. Get ready for us; Get ready for us because we're going to be successful, confident, and strong!!!!!!”

There is a guide for us in the tasks ahead. We cannot let zip-codes mandate the quality of education. Our faithfulness to our children, our prayers for the future of children everywhere show us the way. We must let our love for the children keep us from all cynicism and despair. “We are your future! We are your future!” says Kimberly.

The human family has immense reserves of love and ingenuity. As we nurture our own children, as we help to create supportive communities, and schools that deliver excellence in education everywhere, as we seek to make our work beneficial to ALL BEINGS we participate in the necessary healing. We can keep the hopes and dreams alive. The choice is ours. Please join with me in singing hymn number 124, “Be That Guide.”