

THE MEASURE OF OUR SUCCESS

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Horace Mann Sunday, May 3, 2009
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Scriptural Reading:

Proverbs 20:10-11

NRSV

Differing weights, and differing measures,
are both alike an abomination to the Lord.
Even children are known by their doings,
by whether what they do is pure and right.

Modern Reading

from *The Measure of our Success* Marian Wright Edelman
[Beacon Press, 1992]

With unprecedented economic competition from abroad and changing patterns of production at home that demand higher basic educational skills, America cannot wait another minute to do whatever is needed to ensure that today's and tomorrow's workers are well prepared rather than useless and alienated, whatever their color. . .

When the new century dawns with new global economic and military challenges, America will be ready to compete economically and lead morally only if we

1. **stop** cheating and **neglecting** our children for selfish, short-sighted, personal and political gain;
2. . . **recognize** that America's **ideals**, future, and fate are as inextricably intertwined with the fate of its poor and non-white children as with its privileged and white ones;
3. **love our children** more than we fear each other and our perceived or real external enemies;
4. **acquire** the **discipline** to invest preventively and systematically in all of our children now in order to reap a better trained work force and more stable future tomorrow;
5. **curb** the **desires** of the overprivileged so that the survival needs of the less privileged may be met, and spend less on weapons of death and more on lifelines of constructive development for our citizens;
6. **set** clear, national, state, city, community, and personal **goals** for child survival and development, **and invest** whatever leadership, commitment, time, money, and sustained effort are needed to achieve them.
7. **struggle** to begin **to live** our lives **in** less selfish and **more purposeful ways**, redefining success by national and individual character and service rather than by national consumption and the superficial barriers of race and class.

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“Don’t let anything get in the way of your education.” Those were the dying words of her father, a black Baptist minister in Bennettsville, South Carolina, to his youngest daughter, Marian Wright. She was 14. So she didn’t. She finished the local segregated “training” high school and went on to Spelman College in Atlanta. She won a traveling fellowship to go abroad and visit other cultures. When she returned, she plunged into the Civil Rights movement. After being arrested for her non-violent activism, she decided to become a lawyer. Yale Law School honed her considerable advocacy skills. She joined the NAACP Legal Defense Fund as the first African American woman ever admitted to the bar in the state of Mississippi.

In 1967, when US Senators Robert Kennedy and Joseph Clark toured the poverty-ridden Mississippi Delta, Marian Wright encountered Peter Edelman, an assistant to Kennedy. They were married the following year, three months after the assassination of Dr. King and only a month after that of Bobbie Kennedy.

They settled in Washington. Marian had helped with Head Start programs in Mississippi. She called her new public interest law firm the Washington Research Project, and focused it on issues related to the lives of children growing up in poverty. In 1973 it became the Children’s Defense Fund – an advocacy and research center for children’s issues, documenting problems and possible solutions for poor, minority, and disabled children. To stay independent, she declined any form of government funding.

She says that her parents embodied an understanding of religion as service to others. That guides her to this day, and she’ll soon be 70.) As she puts it, “If you don’t like the way the world is, you have an obligation to help change it. Just do it one step at a time.”

In 1992, she published *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*. That little book was a huge success for our Beacon Press, selling over 100,000 copies. When I became President of the UUA the next year, Marian was good enough to meet with me several times. We talked about everything from the religious education of her three sons, Joshua, Jonah, and Ezra, who were given a thorough education in both their mother's Christian and their father's Jewish traditions, to the mass gathering that they helped her organize in 1996, called "Stand for Children." I joined 300 other religious leaders with her up on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, before 300,000 people gathered on the Washington Mall. "Leave No Child Behind" was the motto of the CDF, along with the goal of supporting public policies that would ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life, as a grounding for a successful passage into adulthood. Public programs for poor children, however, for other people's children, were under attack. A few years later the Clinton administration moved to phase out AFDC, Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Marian was profoundly upset by how little help mothers moving from welfare to work received in the way of childcare, healthcare, and other supports. She felt betrayed by her long-time friends and allies, Hillary and Bill Clinton. Her husband Peter resigned in protest from the Department of Health and Human Services. Yet Clinton awarded Marian a Presidential Medal of Freedom for her 25 years of work with CDF. Now it's 35.

The theme, "No Child Left Behind," of course, was taken up by the next President, and made the title of legislation designed to reform public education in America. It enacts a theory known as outcome- or standards-based education reform. Setting high standards and establishing measurable goals is supposed to improve the ability of schools to help children succeed in learning and in life. So the Act requires states to develop assessments in basic skills, given to all students in certain grades, in order to get federal school funds. Many educators and supporters of the Act complain that it was never adequately funded. Nickle-Bee, as it's called, does not set a national test or standard; each state sets its own. Here in Massachusetts we've all become familiar with the MCAS – the Massachusetts Certified Assessment System. Tests are to be given again later this month. As standardized tests go, many educators consider them actually to be a pretty good ones.

But many groups, like Promise the Children, a UU advocacy group for Massachusetts children, think MCAS itself needs reform. And it does seem ironic that we have now hallowed scores on standardized tests as the leading “measure of our success” in schools, communities, states, and as a nation, when Marian Wright Edelman clearly had in mind something much more qualitative than quantitative

I say this, mind you, as someone who from a young age always did well on such tests. When I was in third grade, for example, my teacher, Mrs. Johnson, noticed I was bored. She was right. I was already reading big books from my parents library. So I was tested. The next fall, I was in fifth grade, having learned the multiplication tables that summer.

I was reminded of this just recently. I was doing a memorial service here. For a man, who, like my father, had been in the marine business. And who should show up to speak, but one of my third grade classmates who reminded me that being “the smartest” test taker is not necessarily how you most want to be known or measured by your peers. It made me a lonely kid. It took me years, however, to learn, and even now imperfectly, that there are other equally important forms of intelligence. Intellectual strength and achievement can be a source of that most deadly source of other sins, pride, and often a pretty lousy measure of what really constitutes success.

During April school vacation I spent five days with 25 members of our First Parish Youth Group and five other adults, doing an “awesome urban adventure and service week” in Dorchester. Now some of our kids are high achievers, academically. Others, not so much. Some have great social gifts and awareness, others, not so much. What we did together was not world transforming. Some helped with a school vacation program for elementary age kids from working class families. Others fixed up a nursery room and a pre-school room in the Dorchester UU church, which almost died, but is now growing again. Some of us cleaned up a vacant lot for a church parking lot and the yard at the nearby parsonage. Some policed Meetinghouse Hill for broken bottles and glass and debris. One group went to a teen tutoring program, others met with teens at the multi-cultural

Dorchester Youth Collaborative, hanging with the “crumpers” and learning how their music differs from “gangsta rap;” or with the families of local teens killed in gang violence, including the founding mother of the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute. Who got them reflecting on which of the seven components of peace -- *Love, Unity, Faith, Hope, Courage, Justice and Forgiveness* -- is your guiding principle, and which the one you struggle with most.

One by one our teens came forward and said things like, “Justice is my guiding principal, but I struggle with forgiveness.” The mother of a murdered Dorchester teen answered, “I understand, I understand, honey.” She also pointed out to our kids – she’d done her homework! – that the seven principles of our Unitarian Universalist faith just take those words and then expand them into sentence form. Now ponder that. Our teens sure did!

At the end of the week, thanks to an unsought foundation grant that they’ve enjoyed for several years now, our teens exercised some notable youth philanthropy and democracy. They debated at length and then voted to give \$2000 to the Peace Institute, \$2000 to the Youth Collaborative, \$1000 to the after-school and vacation camps at Dorchester House, and \$1500 to our partner congregation in Dorchester, to help with outreach and building restoration efforts. The gift came from the grant, and also from their own fundraising toward future Youth Group service and learning expeditions. I was very proud of them in many ways, but most of all how they acted – toward one another, with no cliques or divisions between the “cool” kids and the more awkward, the brains and the less brainy, toward their advisors, with real cooperation, and toward their host community.

In her little book, Marian Wright Edelman reminded her children and all of us that it’s not easy to cross lines of race, ethnicity, and economic forms of privilege to see that other people’s children are, in fact, sibs to our own children, part of a shared future. It’s a paradigm shift to see that the measure of my success is not how well I do on a test, what college I get into, or how “cool” my peers think I am,” but rather, as Dr. King said, “the content of my character.” Our teens seem to know that.

Even before our work began, we gathered at the UU Urban Ministry center in Roxbury. Our one-time Intern, the Rev. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh, led some games and exercises as orientation. One had to do with identity. They named its many dimensions. Then they each named which was most important to them. At first I was surprised. The majority said that the most important part of their identity was not their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, interests, achievements, religion, or anything outward, but rather something that no one outside can see, but which they have to make visible by their behavior and interactions with others – their “moral values.”

Which led me to reflect, “You know, this is the measure of our success, yours and mine. In a culture that is problematically materialistic, superficial, commercial and competitive, we may just be succeeding at something that matters. Nurturing children who are capable not only of behaving with consideration and integrity, but also with empathy toward the struggles of others not so privileged as themselves.

One of the more dramatic exercises Sarah did with the youth was a team balloon race. You blow up a balloon. You let the air out, trying to get it flying toward a finish line. Your teammate runs to where it falls, then blows up her balloon. And so on. But the wind blows, as the Bible says, wherever it will, sometimes sideways, or even backwards, beyond anything you or your skills can control. The kids got the point. There are forces in society that blow around, making some people winners and others, not so much.

The measure of our success is not how nice a house we live in, or how many tests we ace, or how many toys we accumulate before the game is over. The measure of our success is the kind of spiritual resilience and moral sensitivity we nurture in ourselves, in one another, and in those we influence. May we learn even from our frustrations and failures, and apply not only to our children, but to our own lives, the kind of just measure that truly matters in the end. So may it be. Amen.

Be that guide whom love sustains. Rise above the daily strife:
Lift on high the good you find. Help to heal the hurts of life.

Be that helper nothing daunts – doubt of friend or taunt of foe.
Ever strive for liberty. Show the path that life should go.

Be that builder trusting good, bitter though the test may be:
Through all ages they are right, though they build in agony.

Be that teacher faith directs. Move beyond the old frontier:
Though the frightened fear that faith, be tomorrow's pioneer.

Benediction

And now, may we have faith in life to do wise planting
that the generations to come may reap even more abundantly than we.
May we be bold in bringing to fruition
the golden dreams of human kinship and justice.
This we ask that the fields of promise may become fields of reality.
Go in peace. Amen.

