

Chalice Lighting

Our flaming Chalice has become a symbol of our denomination. The lighting of the Chalice unites us in common worship, and symbolizes the seven principles, which you can find in the back of your Order of Service, who we as Unitarian/Universalists try to live by. Today, we honor and pay respect to the education of our youth. Education, of course, does not stop when ones schooling is completed, it is a lifelong pursuit. It is a belief I try to instill in my own children, and one way to do that is to practice it. As has been said, children pay more attention to our actions than what we say, unless of course, were doing the dishes, or making a bed. I must admit, that I am not one who enjoyed taking tests, or doing term papers which I knew were to be graded. I suppose, it is a necessary part of education. I say suppose, because I cannot think of a better way.

But, if it teaches us to recognize that education is a lifelong pursuit, and not just a means to a living, then I think, education has served its purpose. I am not by any means demeaning formal education; I consider it vital; as one wag put it, “if you think education is expensive, try ignorance.” But I do believe that education is more than regurgitating facts. And, that is what I try to live by, although at times I may fail, and that is what I try to impart to my children, though that often falls on deaf ears when they are studying for a test. So, I light this Chalice today, for that pursuit of knowledge and for a good education for all our children.

Sermon: *Education for All*

I had the pleasure of delivering a sermon on public education in 2004. And when I reread it in preparation for this morning, I noticed that I talked a lot about policy. I shouldn't have been surprised. Much of my work is directly affected by education policy on the federal, state, and local levels. In particular, policies that govern what happens in schools were changed drastically by No Child Left Behind. So it was quite natural at the time for me to focus on the sometimes disastrous policies that are foisted upon or created by schools, school districts, and state departments of education. This morning, I'd like to take a different tack. I'd like to talk about the support of quality public education as a moral obligation.

Imagine that the government decreed that on January 1, 2009, every child will be assigned at random a number from one to three. Those children who were fortunate enough to draw the number one would receive the very best our education system had to offer, including top-flight teachers, state-of-the-art facilities, and the most successful and effective curriculum materials and instructional methods. They would have access to the most interesting, engaging, and challenging coursework, including Advanced Placement and honors classes. These fortunate "ones" would also enjoy the prospect of earning undergraduate and post-graduate degrees from the most elite colleges and universities in the country. They would emerge from the American education system with the prospect of interesting, successful, and lucrative careers.

Those children who were assigned the number two would receive an adequate education. Their teachers would be knowledgeable, but not inspiring, and their coursework would not support or encourage innovation or creativity. The word that would best describe the education twos would receive is "serviceable." They would have an opportunity to attend college, as well, but not an elite college, and they would have to overcome a mediocre education in order to qualify. The best of them could aspire to a mid-level career with a modest salary.

Some of the twos would be assigned to vocational tracks, with few academic requirements. They would be trained to become craftsmen and technicians. They would have limited options after high school, as a matter of fact, they would be discouraged from doing anything but enter the workforce immediately after graduation. Those who were willing to work hard and had strong entrepreneurial skills could achieve a measure of material success, and might even be able raise their families in comfort and security.

The final group, the threes, would be out of luck. They would be relegated to the worst schools in America. Their teachers and administrators would have relatively little knowledge about the subjects they were expected to teach, and would be apathetic and unmotivated. Their school buildings would be dilapidated, and even unhealthy. The threes would not be expected to read, write, or compute, and would do so at a low level. Many would be processed through the education system despite their inability to demonstrate even the most basic academic skills, due

in part to social promotion. The success stories among them, those who actually managed to finish high school, would be relegated to the lowest paying, least desirable, and least appreciated jobs, with few prospects of advancement. Those three who didn't graduate from high school would be condemned to lives of poverty, unemployment, violence, drug addiction, incarceration, and early death.

I have exaggerated, of course. In my unlikely scenario, I have made some unrealistic, and, perhaps, unfair, assumptions. But, the most important aspect of this example is the lack of choice afforded to children and their parents. Their futures would be determined by the results of a random and indifferent lottery.

I can predict with 100% certainty that such a plan, assuming it could make it through a Congress prepared to commit political suicide, and would be signed by a deranged president, perhaps in his final months in office, would result in nothing less than a second American Revolution. There would be mass demonstrations, calls for impeachment, and civil unrest. No parent would ever permit his or her child to be labeled and condemned in such a way.

Yet, for too many children in our country, my example isn't far off the mark. Our national high school graduation rate is 68%. In the richest country in the world, the land of opportunity, nearly a third of all students fail to graduate. If a child happens to be born African-American, Hispanic, or Native American, he or she has a fifty-fifty chance of graduating. By comparison, the graduation rate for white students is 75%, for Asian students it's 77%. The chances are even slimmer for students who attend school in high-poverty, racially-segregated, and urban school districts. Their graduation rates lag from 15 to 18 percent behind their peers.

As I was preparing to talk to you today, I was reminded of an incident I witnessed in the courthouse in Upper Marlboro. One morning, as I was waiting for a case to be called, there appeared in the hallway a group of ten to twelve young African-American men who were being led by several sheriff's deputies. They were chained together and manacled, so that they were required to shuffle. Suddenly, the usually bustling hallways were eerily silent as everyone watched this sad and sobering spectacle. I couldn't help but think that it was not too long ago that young men much like these were being led in chains to the courthouse steps to be sold to the highest bidder. I don't know for sure, but I suspect strongly that few of the prisoners had made it successfully through our public education system; that they were not equipped to make healthier, life-sustaining choices about how they would exist in the world. Their failure was our failure.

If Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Twentieth Century minister and theologian, was correct when he wrote that "The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children," what does it say about us that such appalling graduation rates are permitted to persist? Have we lived up to the moral duty to our children, all of our children, to provide the very best education system possible?

I worry that when the American civilization has gone the way of the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans, it will be said of us that our society created the most wonderful sports venues, but

little else of consequence; it will not be said that we prized our children above all; that we learned the lessons of the townspeople who were told that the Messiah was among their children.

As I witness the accomplishments of the young people who have joined us this morning, I am reminded of the hard work and sacrifice that were necessary for them to reach this point, hard work and sacrifice on the students' part, and on the part of their parents and teachers. What would have happened if their talents had not been recognized and nurtured?

We are guilty of thinking too small. We have made the teaching and learning of basic skills the bedrock of our education policy, as if those who acquire minimal reading, writing, and computing skills are equipped to succeed in today's world and to lead useful and satisfying lives. Ironically, in too many cases, we don't do a good job with these basics, either. Yes, every child must learn to read and write, but that's only the beginning. Part of the charge of education is to equip our children with the means to experience the world in its fullness; to make available the very best that our culture has to offer; to provide them with the tools they will need to explore what it means to be human. Rudimentary reading and writing skills won't accomplish these goals.

In America there are girls and boys who have talents that remain undiscovered and unrealized in large part because our society has not truly committed itself to the goal of a good and effective education for all. We have no way to determine how many writers, doctors, scientists, teachers, civil servants, philosophers, nurses, entrepreneurs, and others who contribute to society have been lost because children have been allowed to squander their gifts.

The crime is even more heinous when one considers the obscene amounts of money that are spent on other priorities: hundreds of billions of dollars to bailout Wall Street, ten billion dollars a month for a war of doubtful necessity, hundreds of millions of dollars to build sports venues for billionaire team owners, and billions more for weapons projects that even the Department of Defense says are not needed. We are like parents who, when making a choice between paying their children's college tuition and installing a state of the art burglar alarm, choose the burglar alarm. Exactly what is it that they are protecting?

The good news is that we have the wherewithal to provide a quality education for every child, if only we could summon the will. Nearly every faith tradition recognizes a duty to protect, nurture, and teach children. Unitarian Universalist congregations agree to promote and affirm seven principals that encompass what we believe, and reflect the way we view the world. But we can never realize the world we envision if we do not recognize our obligation to advocate and support an effective and successful education for all children. Our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person demands it. Our pursuit of justice, equity and compassion compels it. If we hope to build a world of acceptance, where spiritual growth for everyone is encouraged, we must see that every child has the ability to draw upon the wisdom and insight of seekers of the past and present. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning is possible only when one

learns to value truth and can mine the rich treasury of ideas of those who have struggled to understand what is true and meaningful. Children must be taught to understand and value the democratic process in order to participate in it in a meaningful way. The goal of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all is achievable only if every child has an understanding of the world, its history, and his or her place in it. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, depends upon an awareness and understanding of the intricate relationships that shape our world.

If we are to raise the quality of life of all our children above mere subsistence to we must recognize our moral duty to educate all of them. After all, the Messiah might be among our children.

May our efforts be guided by the principles in which we believe. So may it be.