

[Reading #1: "Booker T. and W.E.B.," by Dudley Randall]

[Reading #2: from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain]

A Brief History of the Future of School

Sermon by Debra Smith, delivered on October 3, 2010

Thank goodness providence provided Huck Finn a wiser teacher in the Widow Douglass to counter the slave-owning, stingy, narrow-minded, hypocritical (and skinny) Miss Watson. In contrast to hers, the widow's notion of "providence" is enough to make this boy's mouth water, even though the logic of helping others and putting them before his own self-interest escapes him at the time. In this novel, which frequently shows up on banned-book lists, Huck journeys down the Mississippi, and learns to value the widow's counter-intuitive, golden rule lesson through his maturing compassion for the escaped slave, Jim, and through his disgust at human greed and the self-serving behavior he witnesses. He has seen so much craven selfishness dressed up as civilized society that by the novel's end he resolves, "I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before."

I am amazed at how much our society today imitates Huck's. As in Mark Twain's time, a period he dubbed "The Gilded Age," craven self-interest is once again a trumpeted virtue, despite the excesses of the stock market that so recently derailed the world economy and that has engendered such fear and insecurity that people around the world are scapegoat-ing sectors of society with impunity. And yet we dare not propose to use government to impose limits on the market. Government, which traditionally put checks on markets, is currently viewed with greater suspicion than corporations, whose primary reason for existence is to make profits for its owners through efficiencies. Now, I know that—what with mutual funds—we are all now owners. Wall Street and Main Street are inextricably linked, and those of us who shop on Main Street, or its successor, Walmart, are confident that the benefits have accrued to all of us owners in equal shares—you and Bank of America's Ken Lewis alike. Right?

Efficiencies of scale and increasing productivity rates are great for markets, but are these things *Good*? I mean, in that old-fashioned, Aristotelian, classic philosophy, biblical-questioning way of being *Good*? I am reminded of the current discussion about factory farms. They are responsible for great efficiencies and economies of scale. They feed more people more cheaply than ever before. But are they *Good*? Is this model in its current form sustainable, and just? Does it balance the needs of the environment, the benefits of efficiency, and the health of the nation to achieve the best outcome?

How has this happened, this acquiescence to the primacy of the market to determine what is good? Well, how populism has allied itself with its traditional enemy,

the unfettered market, is a triumph of libertarian mythology and worthy of another sermon. It's explored in great detail in books I've included in my notes.

Not even the father of capitalism, Adam Smith, could have predicted the enshrining of greed to the extent that we now have come to accept as unchallenged dogma. He states his opinions on greed in his other, less-often read treatise, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: "And hence it is, that to feel much for others and little for ourselves, that to restrain our selfish, and to indulge our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature; and can alone produce among mankind that harmony of sentiments and passions in which consists their whole grace and propriety." The father of capitalism and the Widow's message from the Gospels agree here: contrary to what seems obvious, greed needs to be checked by virtue lest it rupture "that harmony" in which consists our grace and "constitutes the perfection of human nature." Where, if not in the government, should that mitigating virtue reside? His answer was in the people, and for that, we need education.

Perhaps we no longer have faith in this image of god. Perhaps we've given ourselves over to the worship of the free market, unabashed, and without apology. And the consolidation of wealth that naturally follows—has followed, indisputably, over the last two decades. And the coarsening of popular culture that has resulted. There are those who would remind us that there might be a higher authority than the market's "invisible hand"—that wisdom from millions of consumers voting their choice at the ticket booths and check-out counter—to determine what is good and true and beautiful. Yes, there are those who would question the market's wisdom when it privileges Britney Spears over, say, Bernard Shaw. However, these scolds and kill-joys are labeled as "elitists" and "snobs" who harbor despicable contempt for the tastes and instincts of the common man.

In his book, *One Market Under God*, social critic Thomas Frank explains the evolution of this strange bed-fellows relationship between corporations and "working stiffs": Business leaders "found powerful new weapons with which to win their 'grand argument' with those who sought to regulate or control any aspect of private enterprise. Since markets express the will of the people virtually any criticism of business could be described as an act of despicable contempt for the common man" (Frank 30).

And now, in the rabid populism and anti-intellectualism typified by Sarah Palin, the very purpose and future of school is being discussed. The media and politicians, both left and right, vilify teachers and their unions, and reformers are placing their faith in that most magical of magic bullets: the profit motive. This, even though there is no evidence that teachers respond to these incentives, nor that incentives improve schools. The current controversy over the movie "Waiting for Superman" and Oprah's endorsement of it, attests to the emotion this solution engenders among teachers. I'll tell you, there is no financial incentive that competes with the pure desire to avoid the consequences of boring to death 30 teenagers during a 90 minute class. Moreover, this so-called pay-for-

performance solution is only one part of a larger movement that attempts to introduce market solutions and models into the endeavor we call school. Now, I have worked in private industry. I know how powerful the profit motive is to engender efficiency and innovation. But I'm not so sure that what we want out of school is efficiency. If we are merely training Booker T.'s workers, I'm pretty sure we can—and have—developed an efficient and cost-effective pedagogy to achieve this. But is this vision of school all we aspire to? Is this the purpose of school?

Certainly one of the founders of the common school, what we have come to recognize as public education, Horace Mann, had a different idea of what school was meant to achieve. Here is what he had to say:

It is impossible for the selfish man to have the same ideas of God as the benevolent man...as impossible for the grown-up man of educational culture to return to the crude and unworthy conceptions which he had of God when he was a child...If men necessarily build up their ideas or conceptions of God and of His attributes from their own previous ideas, ...then every step in education, the inculcation of every new idea, the acquisition of every new scientific principle, the development and training of each intellectual and moral faculty, furnishes precious materials out of which a more adequate and glorious idea of God can be formed. As out of richer paints and purer marble, the artist can make a better picture or statue, so, out of grander and nobler thoughts and out of diviner affections, can we form sublimer and more *God-like* conceptions of our Father in Heaven.

So spoke Horace Mann, president of Antioch College, Ohio, from 1852 until his death. This quote is from his second of twelve sermons delivered to that body and concerning the purpose of education. Succinctly stated: the purpose of education is to create a better God to worship.

Wow. Is that what I do? I thought for just a second before I affirmed this mission. Yes, I am trying to offer a “sublimier” and more *God-like* conception of what we are to worship. By what authority? I had to ask myself. This is pretty heady stuff, after all. What makes me think I know what constitutes a “sublimier” god? And what right do I have to impose that on my students, many of whom come from families who may worship a different conception of god, one that they would not even refer to as a “conception” at all.

Would it surprise you to learn that this “sublimier” god already exists in the literature we study? In the impulse to examine the prejudices and human predicaments we explore in the canon's stories; in the biases we explode in literature—both in fiction and in all other media; in exposing the opaque and unexamined fears that motivate us and are the stuff of our popular myths and religious impulses? In the “Great Books” that

social conservatives trumpet? Would it surprise you to learn that this “sublimar” god exists in the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Social Studies, recently adopted by 27 states, and endorsed by a dozen more? (Idaho has given preliminary approval of the concept...)

Taken as a whole, the god that exists in a traditional “liberal arts” course of study compels us to yearn for something more sublime than mere physical existence. This yearning to define a sublime and transcendent existence beyond this mundane and temporal one exists in our literary and philosophical history, and comprises a core impulse common to all of the world’s “great religions.” The standards stipulate that we “analyze 17th, 18th, and 19th–century documents of historical and literary significance to examine their themes and purposes.” There is a sublime and complex notion of god in an honest fulfillment of that standard.

The standards for social studies require that students “delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy.” Translation: study great thinkers in order to discern their assumptions, biases and prejudices as they go about trying to solve social problems—problems of wealth and poverty, of power and sustainable equity, of access to the benefits of modern society and of a cure for its abuses. Surely students will have the opportunity to encounter “nobler thoughts” and “diviner affections” than they might without this tax-payer supported and common education.

The god that emerges from a diligent pursuit of inquiry requires us to examine our assumptions about the world and causes us to worship humility. All of the world’s “great religions” speak with one voice to affirm the importance of this quality. Taken as a whole, all of the stories that make up the literature of the world warn us against confusing justice with rancor and revenge. Taken as a whole and taken seriously, the traditional “humanities” education nurtures an open mind and dissuades us from pre-judgment. Is this not endorsed by all the gods of all the religions? It assesses claims of veracity and insists on integrity. It promotes the beauty of the golden rule as being the best measure of the truth of any claim. It promotes dignity for all through the blessing of free will and autonomous human agency. It sustains individual freedom by acknowledging the complexity of our interdependency. This is a god I can worship: one who encourages transcendence rather than the mundane; justice rather than rancor; humility rather than arrogance; integrity rather than cowardice; and balance between individual liberty and responsibility. This is a grander, nobler god than the god of the logic of supply and demand, efficiency, and self-interest.

Horace Mann faced some resistance from parents who didn’t want to give up their children’s moral education to teachers and bureaucrats. No wonder! The literature and ideas in our curriculum are powerful. And subversive. They demand teachers who are equal to the task, who understand and can critique this literature and these ideas. The

curriculum demands teachers who have an understanding of their own prejudices and biases, and who can suspend those biases and at the same time challenge students to understand ideas and mindsets that may contradict ideas and mindsets cherished in their own families. This is no small order. Would that the same were required of our elected officials.

But Mann was motivated to create a country that provided a common learning experience so as to “equalize the conditions of men.” To that end of equalization, Antioch College was one of the first to offer the same curriculum to women and men, and admitted people of color well ahead of its rivals. Founded by a religious group, it none-the-less stressed a non-sectarian curriculum, a position Mann, as a Unitarian, advocated for all “common schools,” which also riled some who wanted schools to draw upon an overtly religious (protestant Christian, naturally) course of study.

How far we have fallen from his ideals became apparent to me, again, just recently. It was an article in the *Statesman* business section, and re-printed from a *Bloomberg Businessweek* periodical, so I should not have been all that surprised at the finding: the value of a college education no longer provides a worthwhile RETURN ON INVESTMENT. Oh, the article acknowledged in passing, that there are other aspects of a college education that may be deemed valuable (those “externalities” accountants speak of)—like “...the great books,...the critical reasoning skills,...the experience itself,” but these were overshadowed by a three-pages of data proving that a college education—“bottom line”—just doesn’t “pencil out.”

Now, I do not mean to diminish the very real concern about the debt load being carried by college students and their parents. In this sense, a sensible cost/benefit analysis is prudent. But surely this discussion should be expanded on a national level to concern itself with the downward pressure on wages and salaries being experienced in all levels of jobs requiring degrees. And the discussion should certainly consider the rising costs of college due in no small part to reduced state and federal funding; and pressures caused by rising healthcare costs borne by our colleges; and by what I like to call the “taxation” levied by bankers on borrowers who must pay for bank profits on their college loans. (Thank god this has been reversed by legislation that goes into effect in 2014—legislation the John Boehner criticized as “job-killing,” because it eliminated the bank middle-men and their profits. When banks benefit, inefficiency is tolerated).

The very fact that we are discussing a college education at all in terms of its benefits being merely financial, and merely as accruing to the individual, shows just how far we’ve come as a nation from the traditional concept of the value of an education. This focus solely on the individual, and on the remunerative nature of education negates a long-standing assumption about the purpose of **taxpayer**-supported education. The purpose of public support of education is to yield a benefit to the commonwealth. And, not so much to produce a populace capable of generating a robust standard of living, but rather to produce a populace capable of generating a robust citizenry so that this

experiment in democracy might endure. Markets claim to love democracy. If they do, they should recognize their own self-interest lay in ensuring its enduring health. But in this day, we have conflated democracy and free-market capitalism as though participating as consumers in the marketplace is equivalent to exercising our rights as citizens.

We have seen from Horace Mann, to Twain, and to W.E.B. DuBois that how we understand the ultimate purpose of education drives what education will look like. Just as the poem pointed out how Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois had very different notions of the purpose of education, these two dichotomies still exist. Lately, however, there is a populist, anti-elitist assault on the very entity that would insure the teaching of the values enshrined in the “great books,” and the “critical reasoning skills” so easily dismissed as irrelevant in the *Businessweek* article. There is a dangerous anti-intellectualism that rebuffs any attempts to criticize the market for catering to our baser instincts. If the majority values that which is base, craven, or selfish, does that make these things *Good*? If we are going to preserve the power of the majority to determine what is good (and I agree with the justness of this proposition), then the quality of the god we worship matters. Does school play a role in this? Since the time of Horace Mann, for almost 200 years, it has. School has served to inform us of the “better angels of our natures.” Defining *the Good*, what Horace Mann calls God, is too important to leave to church alone.

I want to close with a story. Last Spring, two days before the last day of instruction, and about two weeks before graduation for these students whom I had taught for two years, I almost lost my job. In a fit of exasperation, I said something I shouldn't have to a group of three unruly boys. One boy apologized after class. One boy threatened to have my job, called his parents, and 20 minutes later I was suspended. The principal had little choice. His parents are our customers. And it wasn't the first time I had been in the principal's office that year. You see, while I often comfort the afflicted—listening to stories of broken hearts, parents who have forced their kids out of the house, dads who are drunk again, mother's boyfriends that they can't stand—I also afflict the comfortable. I challenge their thinking.

Take Friday, for example. We were discussing *The Scarlet Letter*, by Hawthorne, brother-in-law to Horace Mann, by the way, and we were at the part where Hester Prynne tries to convince her lover, the Reverend Dimmesdale that he has paid enough for their sin, and it was time to begin living again. She has come to terms with her sin, and during her long exile from society, she has come to believe that the whole Christian cosmology of original sin through Eve's transgression is a conspiracy. Yes. Hawthorne was a radical feminist. Now, I cannot do justice to this revered text from the hallowed canon if I gloss over this. I am sure I challenged no small number of students on that day. I would like to be a fly on the wall during dinner—if that even happens anymore.

I don't know any bad teachers. I do know teachers who are confused about the goals and purposes of school. I do know teachers who have not adjusted well to this new

paradigm of school as a commercial enterprise with products and customers and satisfaction surveys and performance based assessment measured by multiple-choice tests.

What can you do? Look at the Common Core Standards. Study how they would guide what gets taught, and then advocate for them. Parents of school age children: instead of a gift at Christmas, give your teacher a supportive letter to the editor. Instead of focusing on candy sales and gift wrap fundraisers, form a parent advisory group to discuss these standards and how to assist your school in implementing them. Parents of grown children: stay involved. If you're retired, attend legislative education committee meetings. Get informed. Challenge people who vilify teachers and their union. We are the only entities who are actively resisting the creeping commercialization of school. Finally, a group of concerned churches in the valley are beginning to speak up. On October 26, I have been asked to represent BUUF at a symposium on the future direction of public schools. It is my honor to do so. What will you do? The UUA has not sponsored a significant education initiative in this country for over 30 years. It is as if we have surrendered to a false god.

Oh, and Hester Prynne. What she said to her lover to persuade him to give up his self-flagellation: "It is not God, but those iron men of New England that have denied the best in you." He had been worshipping the wrong god.

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