

Curriculum, Culture, and Social Cohesion

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This morning, I've been asked to talk about educating in a multicultural world, and I would like to begin by telling a story. One dreary Monday morning in 1972, I was sitting in my office in Albany, New York, and to avoid the pressures of the day, I turned to the stack of third class mail perched precariously on the corner of my desk. On top of the heap, I was fascinated to discover, was the student newspaper from Stanford University. The headline announced that the faculty at Stanford had reintroduced a required course in Western Civilization, after having abolished all requirements just three years before. The students were offended by the faculty's brash act, and in a front page editorial they referred to the required course as an "illiberal act." The editors concluded with this blockbuster question: "How dare they impose uniform standards on non-uniform people?"

While reflecting on that puzzling proposition, my mind flashed back to the days of Cambodia and Kent State, to the time when I was locked in and locked out of my office and frequently shouted down. I recall the students, most of whom I liked very much, assuring me that it wasn't personal; it was just that I was over thirty and that I was running a corrupt system.

What I found most revealing during these endless confrontations was the fact that the students kept insisting there was nothing we had in common. There we were, sitting in my office, getting hungry, wanting sleep, shouting,

laughing, talking to one another, angry about the war. And yet according to these students, there was absolutely nothing that we shared.

That's what troubled me the most. I was troubled not by the lack of sleep. I was troubled that some of America's most gifted students, after fourteen or more years of formal learning, still had not discovered the simple truth that while we're not uniform, we do have many things in common. They had not discovered the fundamental fact that while we're autonomous human beings with our own aptitudes and interests, we are at the same time deeply dependant on each other. To put it simply, we're all alone, and we're all together, and that's the human condition at its core.

This brings me to the central theme of my remarks today. Educating students in a multicultural world surely means affirming the sacredness of every individual. It means celebrating the uniqueness of every culture. And as the Stanford students put it so succinctly, it means acknowledging the non-uniformity that separates one person from another, the distinctiveness that makes us who we are. That's the centerpiece of education in a multicultural world as I see it.

But there's another side to the equation. In our deeply divided world, students also must begin to understand that while we're all alone, we do share many things in common. And while we celebrate individualism in education, I'm convinced it's immensely important that we celebrate community, as well, and that we begin to understand the commonalities we all share.

Where do we begin? Several years ago in a book called *Quest for Common Learning*, Art Levine and I suggested that we organize the core curriculum in the nation's colleges and schools not on the basis of the disciplines, but on the basis of what we call the human commonalities—those universal experiences that are found in all cultures and among all people on the

planet. We concluded that there are, in fact, eight fundamental characteristics that bind us altogether, and that as students study these commonalities, they can begin to learn not only about their diversity, but about the human community, as well.

First, at the most basic level, we all share the universal human experience of birth and growth and death. It's so simple, it's so essential, and yet it's so forgotten. The life cycle binds us all together and yet the sad truth is that most of us go through life without reflecting on the mystery of our own existence, not understanding conception, not considering the sacredness of our own bodies, not learning about how to sustain wellness or pondering the imperative of death. Young people today seem to know more about VCRs and the carburetors of their cars than they know about the functioning of their own bodies.

My wife is a certified nurse midwife and delivers babies, including seven grandchildren of our own. And Kay tells me of delivering the babies of teenage girls. These are children having children—young mothers who, for nine months, have fed their unborn infants on Coke and potato chips. And then we wonder why children come to school not well prepared to learn.

I'm suggesting that above all else, we share the mystery of birth and growth and death. Educating in a multicultural world means to me not only having students learn about the life cycle we all share, but also helping them to discover how these most basic human experiences differ from one culture to another.

This leads me to commonality number two. In addition to the life cycle, all people on the planet use symbols to express feelings and ideas. Our sophisticated use of language sets human beings apart from all other forms of life, and it's through the use of words that we are connected to each other.

Consider the miracle of this moment. I stand here vibrating my vocal cords, and molecules go bombarding in your direction. They hit your tympanic membrane, signals go scurrying up your eighth cranial nerve, and there's a response deep in your cerebrum that approximates, I trust, the images in mind. But do you realize the audacity of this act? I assume that we're intellectually and perhaps even evocatively connected.

I wish to make an essential point. In our multicultural world, the use of symbols is what makes us truly human; it's the glue that holds us all together. It's the only vehicle we have to define who we are and where we fit. And so I'd like to see a core curriculum in which students not only study the parts of speech, but also how language profoundly shapes our lives. We will make it on the planet Earth to the degree that we understand the sacredness of symbols.

Writing recently in *The New York Times*, Malcolm Bradbury said, "It's an old truth that if we do not have mastery of our language, language itself will master us. We discover life," he said, "through language." Today, though, we live in a world where obscenities abound, where politicians use 60-second sound bites to destroy the integrity of their opponents, where cliches have become substitutes for reason, and where prejudice is frozen in hurtful slogans even on a college campuses.

In response to these challenges, I propose that all students be required to complete a course in expository writing and oral discourse, and that all seniors write an essay on a consequential topic to test their capacity to think critically and integrate ideas. I suggest, as well, that all students be asked to complete a course on the ethics of communication—a seminar where the use and abuse of language can be considered, where political debates are carefully critiqued, and where the integrity of one's own discourse is thoughtfully confronted. And finally, I'd like to see every student in the United States study a language other

than their own, since foreign language study helps students gain insight and discover the richness of other cultures and traditions.

I'm suggesting that educating students in a multicultural world means teaching them that language is a sacred trust and that truth is the obligation that we assume when we're empowered with the use of words. And if we improve our use of language, we will make the human community more coherent and more committed to a common cause. The way we think is shaped and formed by the symbol systems that we use.

Now I'd like to reflect on the third human commonality. I'm convinced that beyond the life cycle and beyond the use of symbols, all people on the planet respond to the aesthetic. This is a universal language that can transcend the words we use and bring us evocatively together. Just as you can make connections in another culture by taking along a baby, you can make connections by taking along a guitar, a harp, or a violin. The symbol system and the magic of the arts need no interpreters; they establish their own bonds across the cultures that too often are divided.

Dance is a universal language, architecture is a universal language, music is a universal language. Painting and sculpture are languages that can be understood all around the world. Salvador Dali's painting "The Persistence of Memory" can be understood by everyone haunted by the passage of time, and when Picasso confronts the unspeakable agonies of war—the dismembered child, the scream of the bereft mother, the shattered home—and puts them on a huge canvas called "Guernica", you don't have to be Spanish to understand it. He makes a universal statement about destruction that can be felt in the heart of every human being.

When we judge the quality of a culture, we do so by the artistic symbols that are used—the cave paintings, the shaping of the vases. Consider how the

gospel song "Amazing Grace" can stir common bonds among people, whether they're from Appalachia or Manhattan. And consider also how "We Shall Overcome" when sung in slow and solemn cadence can stir powerful feelings regardless of race or economic status. I'm suggesting that for the most intimate, most profound, and most moving experiences, we turn to music, dance, and the visual arts to express feelings that words cannot convey. This is true for all people on the planet, and in a multicultural world, we must celebrate the universal language of the arts.

This brings me to the fourth human commonality. All people on the planet have the miraculous capacity to recall the past and anticipate the future. We are, in fact, so far as we know, the only species on the planet that can put itself in time in space. Amazing, stunning. T.S. Eliot wrote: "Time present and time past are both present in time future, and time future is contained in time past." And yet how often we squander this truly awesome capacity to look in both directions.

Educating in a multicultural world means asking students to study both the richness of their own heritage and the richness of other cultures, too, recognizing—as Diane Ravitch put it—that cultural pluralism is one of the norms of a democratic and free society. Critics of multiculturalism insist that this will lead to a diminished respect for Western heritage. I disagree. Multiculturalism at its best is not an attack on anyone's ideals. It's a simple recognition that in a nation as diverse as ours, we must respect the differences of other people while also acknowledging that the world is becoming more interdependent every single year. To put it simply, in the days ahead, all students should study Western culture to understand our past and they should study non-Western cultures to understand our future. And I'm also convinced

that ethnic and women's studies will enrich the curriculum rather than dilute it.

The fifth commonality relates to our social bonding. In addition to the life cycle, to the use of symbols, to our response to the aesthetic, to our sense of time and place, all people on the planet are also members of groups and institutions that consequentially shape their lives. Nearly 150 years ago Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, "We do not make a world of our own. Rather, we fall into institutions already made and we have to accommodate ourselves to them." Some we're born into, others we join. But no matter how you slice it, we're all caught up in the web of groups and institutions by the dozens, or even by the hundreds, perhaps. Every society organizes itself and carries on its work through groups and institutions, even though, of course, specific practices vary dramatically from one culture to another.

Our son Craig lives in a Mayan village in the jungles of Belize with his Mayan wife and three children. And when we visit Craig each year, flying from the jungles of Manhattan to the jungles of Belize, I'm impressed that Mayans and Americans—who may be separated by a thousand miles and a thousand years—still carry on their work in very basic ways. The Mayans have family units, elected leaders, village councils, law enforcement officers, jails, schools, and places where they worship, just as we do. In all of this they're very different, but also very much alike. And in multicultural education, I'd love to see students do a paper comparing Santa Cruz, California with Santa Cruz, Belize. There are, after all, groups and institutions that we share.

This brings me to human commonality number six. While we're all different, we're all also connected to the ecology of the planet Earth. We're all embedded in nature as working parts, as Lewis Thomas puts it. David, my three-year-old grandson in Belize, understands his connectedness to nature

very well. As he chases birds and bathes in the river and watches corn being picked and pounded into tortillas, he knows that he's connected to the natural world. He can't escape it. He survives on it every single day. But David's cousins who live with appliances and asphalt in Boston and New Jersey find it enormously difficult to discover the fundamental truth that they, too, are connected to the natural world, and their future also is embedded in the ecology of this planet.

When I was United States Commissioner of Education, Joan Cooney, one of the creators of Sesame Street, came to see me one day. She said she wanted to start a new program for Children's Television Workshop on science and technology for junior high school kids, so that they could understand more about the world in which they live. It was subsequently funded and was called "3-2-1 Contact;" you may have seen it. In doing background work for that project, Joan told me that she had surveyed some junior high school kids in New York City. She asked such questions as, "Where does water come from?" And a disturbing percentage of the children said, "The faucet." They were asked where light comes from, and they said, "The switch." They were asked where garbage goes, and they said, "Down the chute." These young people had little sense of their dependence on the natural world. I'm suggesting that every single one of us is inextricably connected to the natural world, and that our very survival on this planet increasingly will depend on our ability to respond sensitively to the earth home we share together.

The seventh commonality relates to work. The simple truth is that all people on the planet produce and consume. Work is universal; it's something we all do. And students need to understand that if they're consumers, they also need to be producers. It's not enough to take; you also must learn to give back.

Perhaps the most offensive place in the United States for an impatient grandfather is a toy store. The cornucopia of junk goes from the floor to the stars. There are aisles upon aisles of objects that someone has produced, and children don't know how. They see no connection between production and consumption.

Children grow up not knowing that people work in order to live. The connectedness has been broken. "What work do mommy and daddy do?" is hardly a relevant question to many children in our world. I remember when our son was six and he went with me to a little cabin we had outside of Albany, New York. I spent all day trying to build a dock and he sat at the edge of the water, absolutely mesmerized by this event. He saw me do things that I'd never done. On the way back to the cabin that evening, he was rather silent and pensive. Then he broke the silence and said, "Daddy, I wish you'd have grown up to be a carpenter instead of you-know-what." He didn't have the foggiest idea of what "you-know-what" was, but he was impressed that somehow I had engaged at least passingly in something that he understood.

I can't overstate the case that children, and young people, must understand the processes of production and consumption, and know that these are found in every culture on the planet. In fact, I would suggest that students can study culture through the prism of work. Who works? What work is prized? What do women do compared to men? You can understand a culture through production and consumption and make wonderfully interesting cross-cultural comparisons.

When Kay and I first visited the People's Republic of China in 1974, we saw an elementary school in Shanghai where every afternoon the children left the classroom and walked down the hall into their little factory. The students in that school were making little checker games from twigs that they brought in

and boxes that they folded, and the games were taken to the local store and sold. So when these children went to the store they didn't see plastic junk that appeared mysteriously; they saw games they themselves had made. This helps, it seems to me, to build respect for objects.

Another story from China. We were told about a young school boy who had defaced a desk by carving on it. This was absolutely unacceptable, because it degraded something valuable that had been made. The punishment, I discovered, was not to stand him in the corner, but to take him to the factory to watch all day the men and women who make the desks, so that he would understand that someone had given time and energy to create the desk.

Children need to learn very early the universal experiences of production and consumption. And in the twenty-first century, students, especially those in the United States, should confront the problem not only of producing and consuming, but of conservation, too. This will be a challenge for all people on the planet, but especially those who live in countries that are so affluent.

Finally, all people on the planet, regardless of their heritage or tradition, are searching for a larger purpose. There is in all of us an attempt to give meaning and spiritual direction to our lives. So we go from birth itself to the search for meaning, as we consider the eight essentials that make us truly human.

Reinhold Neibuhr put it precisely when he said, "Man cannot be whole unless he be committed. He cannot find himself unless he find a purpose beyond himself." I have to tell you that in the work we do in the schools, and especially in the high schools, I'm impressed that one of the most fundamental pathologies among the young people in our culture is their sense of disconnectedness—their feeling that they do not belong, they do not fit, and there is no defined purpose in their lives. How can one go dead at such an early

age? I've been in high schools where it seems to me that many students drop out because no one noticed that they had dropped in.

I'm also worried about the intergenerational separations in this country, where the old people are no longer connected to the young. Margaret Mead said on one occasion that the health of any culture is defined by three generations vitally interacting with one another. Yet we seem to be creating a kind of horizontal culture, layered by ages. Each age group interacts only with itself. Infants are in nurseries, toddlers are in day care centers, and children are in school. College students go off to their campuses, adults go off to the workplace, and retirees go off increasingly to retirement villages, living and dying all alone. A nursing home where the average age is 80 is as unhealthy as a day care center where the average age is three, where little children talk only to one another.

My mother and father lived for several years in a retirement village. And one day my father called and said, "It's no big deal being 80 around this place. You have to be 90 just to get a cake." But they had a wonderful feature there. They had a day care center so that every morning, 54 five-year-olds came out, and every child had an adopted grandparent. They'd meet together in the afternoon, and when I'd call, my father wouldn't talk about his aches and pains; he'd talk about his little friend, whom he was sure was going to be governor, perhaps even president some day. I was absolutely reminded what powerful images there are when older people are inspired by the energy and the innocence of the young, and similarly, when a five-year-old is able to observe close up the energy as well as the agonies of growing older. Those are lessons that you never learn in school. And yet we're creating a culture that's disconnected, in which values cannot be formed through the connectedness across the generations.

In our search for education in a multicultural world, we must understand that all people on the planet seek to give meaning and purpose to their lives. There should be, in my opinion, an inquiry into the value systems of different cultures throughout time, and a study of religion, which has been so powerfully a part of our search for meaning. In my judgment, that would give some sense of understanding, so that we see this search for meaning not as a reason for war, but as a reason to understand the shared need for a sense of purpose.

In the United States today—and elsewhere, as well—that purpose is captured most authentically by a commitment to service, when we reach out to others and try to apply what we've learned to the realities of life. Vachel Lindsay wrote on one occasion: "It's the world's one crime its babes grow dull; not that they sow, but they seldom reap; not that they serve, but have no gods to serve; not that they die but that they die like sheep." How can we help students to understand that the tragedy of life is not death; the tragedy is to die with commitments undefined and convictions undeclared, and service unfulfilled?

Martin Luther King, Jr. said on one occasion that "everyone can be great because everyone can serve." And I'm convinced that the young people in this country, and around the world, are ready to be inspired by a larger vision.

This morning I've suggested, then, that while we're all different, we are at the same time alike. We are all born, we live, we die. We all send messages to each other, we all respond to the aesthetic, and we all recall the past and anticipate the future. We're all inseparably a part of nature, we're all engaged in producing in consuming, and we all seek to give meaning to our lives.

Would it be possible in the twenty-first century to stop organizing the curriculum around these dreary and outdated academic subjects, which

scholars themselves no longer find very useful? Can we begin instead to organize learning around the human commonalities so that students would not study the subjects, they'd study themselves, and they would use the academic subjects to illuminate larger, most consequential ends? They would not only discover the human commonalities; they would discover the different ways in which humans around the world express the commonalities that we share. And in so doing, the academic subjects would be put toward larger ends. We would make education applicable to the student and we would teach about multiculturalism within a larger context of common ground.

Still, I would like to underscore an absolutely crucial point. It seems to me that a true spirit of community simply cannot be achieved without human justice. And frankly, I've been enormously troubled by the growing gap in America today between the privileged and the poor. I'm troubled that in this, the most affluent nation in the world, one out of every four children under the age of six is officially classified as poor. I'm troubled that hundreds of thousands of little babies in this country do not have good nutrition. And I consider it a national disgrace that the Head Start Program, which prepares disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds for school, is now serving less than half the eligible children because of lack of money. Why is it that we can fund space stations and bail out the savings and loans and never seem to have enough money for our children? I'm suggesting that we will never be a human community unless human justice is confronted, too.

Langston Hughes in his timeless verse, brought this challenge into focus when he wrote: "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun or fester like a sore or crust over? What happens to a dream deferred? Maybe it just sags like a heavy load, or does it explode?"

Here, then, is my conclusion. Let's celebrate diversity, and let's reaffirm community. But let's also acknowledge that terrible injustices still persist, and let's pledge to work together to build for all of us, and especially for our children, a better world. I do not expect miracles overnight. And yet it's my deepest wish that David, my three-year-old grandson in Belize, and Julie, his three-year-old cousin in New Jersey, who speak different languages and have different colored skins, will grow up knowing deep down inside that they are members of the same human family. And this, it seems to me, is what social cohesion is all about.

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