

MULTICULTURALISM

**Remarks by
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Thank you very much.

This morning I've been asked to talk about

- **"Educating in a multicultural world."**

How can we in a deeply divided nation

- **achieve a greater sense of cultural cohesion?**

And I'd like to begin by telling you a story.

I.

In 1972, I was sitting at my desk in Albany, New York.

It was a dreary Monday morning, and to avoid the pressures of the day

- **I turned instinctively to the stack of third-class mail that I kept perched precariously on the corner of my desk**
- **to create the illusion of being very, very busy—it's an old administrative trick.**

On top of the heap was the student newspaper from Stanford.

- **And the headline announced that the faculty had reintroduced a required course in "Western Civilization," after having abolished all requirements just three years before.**
- **Bear in mind, this was 1972.**

The students, I discovered,

- **were mightily offended by the faculty's brash act.**

And in a front page editorial, they declared that

- **"A Required Course is an Illiberal Act."**

And then the editors concluded with this blockbuster question:

- **"How dare they impose uniform standards on nonuniform people?"**

And while reflecting on this puzzling proposition,

- **my mind "flashed back"**
- **to the days of Cambodia and Kent State,**

to the time—not long before—when I was, with regularity,

- **locked in**
- **and locked out of my office.**

And frequently shouted down by students,

- **failing to receive the honor and adulation I deserved.**

And I recalled that these irreverent students,

- **most of whom I liked very much,**

would reassure me that

- **I should not take it personally,**
- **the problem was—they said—I was**
 - **over 30**
 - **and running a corrupt system.**

They were right on at least one count and perhaps two.

But what I found most revealing was that

- **during these endless confrontations, the students kept insisting that**
- **there was nothing that 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 the students,

- **there was absolutely nothing that we shared together.**

And that's what troubled me the most,

I was troubled that some of America's most gifted students

- after 14 or more years of formal learning**

still had not learned the simple truth that

- while we're "nonuniform,"**
- we still have many things in common.**

They had not discovered the fundamental fact that

- **while we are all autonomous human beings**
- **with our own aptitudes and interests**

we are—at the same time—

- **deeply dependent on each other.**

To put it simply,

- **we're all alone,**
- **and we're all together.**

KEY POINT

And 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**
 - **it means acknowledging the "nonuniformity" that separates us from each other.**

But there's another side to the equation.

But it is becoming increasingly apparent that diversity,

- **while important, is insufficient.**

In our deeply divided world, students also must begin to understand that

- **while we're all alone,**
- **we're also all together.**

And while we celebrate individualism in education, I'm increasingly convinced

- **that we go beyond our separations and divisions**
- **and celebrate the spirit of community,**

and begin to identify the commonalities we all share.

HUMAN COMMONALITIES

But where do we begin?

Just what are the points of cultural cohesion?

Several years ago, in a book called

- ***A Quest for Common Learning,***

I suggested that we organize the core curriculum in the nation's colleges and schools,

- **not on the basis of disciplines or departments,**
- **but on the basis of what we called**
 - **the human commonalities,**
- **those universal experiences that are found in**
 - **all cultures**
 - **and among all peoples on the planet.**

And I concluded that there are, in fact,

- **eight commonalities that bind us all together,**

and that as students study these human commonalities, they can learn about

- **not only our diversity,**
- **but our community as well.**

And through such a study the disciplines are used to illuminate larger, more integrative ends.

Creating a greater sense of cultural cohesion.

I. THE LIFE CYCLE

First, at the most basic level,

- **we all share the universal human experiences of birth and growth and death.**

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.**

My wife is a certified nurse midwife and delivers babies

- **including seven grandchildren of our own.**

And Kay tells of delivering the babies of teenage girls.

These are children having children

- **who for nine months have fed their unborn infant coke and potato chips.**

And then we wonder why children come to school

- **not well prepared to learn.**

Pablo Casals spoke to this concern in his book *Joys and Sorrows*:

- **"When will we teach our children in school what they are?" he wrote.**
- **"We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are?**
 - **You are a marvel.**
 - **You are unique.**
- **In all of the world there is no other child exactly like you.**
- **In the millions of years that have passed there has never been another child like you.**
- **And look at your body—what a wonder it is!**
 - **Your legs, your arms,**
 - **your cunning fingers,**
 - **the way you move. . . .**
- **Yes, you are a marvel.**
- **And when you grow up can you then harm another who is, like you, a marvel?**

I'm suggesting that above all else

- **we all share the mystery of birth and growth and death.**

And educating in a multicultural world means

- **not only having students learn about the life cycle we all share,**

it also means

- **helping students discover how these most basic human experiences**
- **differ from one culture to another.**

Those experiences that make us unique and, at the same time, very much alike.

II. LANGUAGE

This leads me to commonality number 2.

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 words

- **that we are all connected to each other.**

Consider the miracle of this very moment.

- **I stand here vibrating my vocal cords.**
- **Molecules are bombarded 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 mine. But do you realize the audacity of this act?**

I'm suggesting that it's the exquisite use of symbols that makes us truly human.

- **And I would like to see a core curriculum in which students**
 - **not only study the way in which language is used in our culture,**
 - **but also how symbol systems differ across cultures, and how they profoundly shape our lives.**

Looking down the road, I'm convinced we, as the human species,

- **will make it on the planet Earth only to the degree that we understand our sacred use of symbols especially of language.**

Writing recently in the *New York Times*, Malcolm Bradbury said:

- **It is an old truth that**
 - **if we do not have mastery over language,**
 - **language itself will master us.**

Today we live in a world where

- **where obscenities abound,**
- **where politicians use 60 second sound bites to destroy the integrity of opponents.**

We live in a world where

- **cliches have become substitutes for reason**
- **and where prejudice is frozen into hurtful slogans**
 - **even on a college campus.**

In response to this challenge,

- **I propose that all students complete a course in expository writing—and oral discourse.**
- **I propose that all seniors be asked to 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 would be considered,**
 - **where political debates would be carefully critiqued,**
 - **and where the integrity of one's own discourse would be thoughtfully confronted.**

I'm suggesting that educating students in a multicultural world

- **means teaching them that language is a shared trust**
- **and that truth is the obligation we assume**
- **when we are empowered in the use of words.**

III. THE ARTS

This brings me to human commonality #3.

I'm convinced that

- **beyond the life cycle,**
- **beyond the use of symbols,**

all people on the planet respond to the aesthetic

- **since art is a universal language, too.**

- **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.**

Consider how the gospel song "Amazing Grace" can stir a common bond among people

- **whether they are from Appalachia or Manhattan.**

And consider also how "We Shall Overcome,"

- **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,**
- **most moving experiences,**
- **we turn to music and dance and the visual arts to express feeling that words cannot convey.**

And this is true for all people on the planet.

IV. HISTORY

This brings me to human commonality #4.

Even though we are all nonuniform, the simple truth is that

- **all people on the planet have the miraculous capacity**
 - **to recall the past**
 - **and anticipate the future.**

We are, in fact, the only species on the planet

- **that can put itself in time and space.**

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 that of other cultures, recognizing**

as Diane Ravitch put it well when she observed that

- **cultural pluralism is one of the norms of a democratic and free society,**
- **Which suggests that students study the rich tapestry of diversity, while awaiting the perniciousness of arrogance or cultural domination.**

"Critics" of multiculturalism insist that such an approach will lead to a

- **diminished respect for Western heritage.**

But "multiculturalism"—at its best—is not an attack on anyone's ideals.

It's a candid 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,

- **students should study Western civilization to understand our past.**
- **And they should study non-Western cultures to understand our future.**

And I'm also convinced that in this context of increased diversity, ethnic and women's studies

- **will enrich the curriculum rather than dilute it.**

But the larger truth is that

- **even with the great diversity of our roots we all have this awesome capacity to place ourselves in time and space.**

V. GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS

This brings me to another commonality we all share.

In addition to

- **the life cycle,**
- **and the use of symbols,**
- **and our response to the aesthetic,**
- **and our sense of time,**

all people on the planet are also members of groups and institutions that

- **consequently shape their lives.**

Our son, Craig, lives in a Mayan village in the jungles of Belize

- **with his Mayan wife and 3 Mayan children,**

who are incidentally

- **the three smartest**
- **and most handsome grandchildren**

on the planet Earth.

And when we visit Craig each year, 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, just like us, have their family units. They have

- **elected leaders,**
- **and village councils,**
- **and law enforcement officers,**
- **and jails,**
- **and schools,**
- **and places where they worship.**

It's all very different

- **but it's also very much the same.**

And in educating in a multicultural world,

I'd love to see students

- **do a paper in which they compare**
 - **Santa Cruz, California**
 - **with Santa Cruz, Belize.**

There are, after all, groups and institutions we all share.

VI. NATURAL WORLD

This brings me to commonality #6.

It's true that we are all different.

But it's also true that we are all connected to the

- **ecology of planet Earth**
- **in which we are embedded as working parts,**
 - **as Lewis Thomas put it.**

David, my 3-year-old grandson in Belize,

- **understands his connectedness to nature very well as he**
- **chases birds,**
- **bathes in the river**
- **and watches corn being picked and pounded into tortillas.**

But David's cousins who live with

- **appliances**
- **and asphalt**
- **in Boston and New Jersey**

find it enormously more difficult

- **to discover their connections to nature.**

When I was United States Commissioner of Education, Joan Cooney,

- **the brilliant creator of "Sesame Street,"**
- came to see me one day.
- **She said they wanted to start a new program at Children's Television Workshop**
 - **on science and technology for junior high school kids,**
 - **so they could understand a little more about their world and what they must understand to live.**
 - **It subsequently was funded and called "3-2-1 Contact."**

In doing background work for that project, they surveyed some junior high school kids in New York City, and asked such questions as:

- **"Where does water come from?" A disturbing percentage said "the faucet."**
- **And they asked, "Where does light come from?" They said "the switch."**
- **And they asked, "Where does garbage go?" "Down the chute."**

I'm suggesting that with all our differences 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.**

VII. WORK

This brings me to human commonality #7.

The simple truth is that

- **all people on the planet spend their time**
 - **producing and consuming.**

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.**

And they should learn as well how

- **"work patterns" vary from one culture to another.**

When Kay and I first visited the Peoples Republic of China in 1974

- **we saw an elementary school—in Shanghai—**
- **where every afternoon the children went to their "little factory" down the hall.**

Students in that school were making little games of "checkers"

- **which then were taken to the local store and sold.**

They were learning very early

- **the reality of production and consumption.**

And in the twenty-first century students should confront

- **the urgent need for conservation**
- **which will be a challenge for all people.**
- **But most especially for countries that are most affluent.**

VIII. SEARCH FOR MEANING

Finally, I'm convinced that all people on the planet,

- regardless of their unique heritage or tradition,**
- are searching for a larger purpose.**
- We all seek to give special meaning to our lives.**

Reinhold Niebuhr put it most precisely when he said,

- **"Man cannot behold unless he be committed,**
- **he cannot find himself,**
- **unless he finds a purpose beyond himself."**

Again, the search for meaning varies greatly from one culture to another.

But it's my own conviction that

- **at this moment,**
- **and in this culture.**

Life is made most authentic as we engage in service.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said

- **everyone can be great**
- **because everyone can serve.**

And I'm convinced that the young people of this country are

- **ready to be inspired by a larger vision.**

And in the Carnegie report

- ***High School* and**
- ***College***

propose that services programs become an integral part of high school and collegiate education.

IX. JUSTICE

This morning I've suggested that

- **while we're all different**
- **we are—at the same time—very much alike.**

We are all born to live and die.

We all send messages to each other.

We all respond to music and dance and the visual arts.

We all recall the past and anticipate the future.

We all are member of groups and institutions.

We all are an inseparable part of nature.

We all engage in producing and consuming.

And we all seek to give meaning to our lives.

- **And this is the glue—the social cohesion—that holds it all together!**

In the twenty-first century

- **would it be possible to organize the core curriculum in our college and schools**
- **in a way that moves beyond the fragmented? An approach that scholars themselves no longer find very useful?**
- **Instead could we use the human commonalities as a new, more integrative framework for student learning?**

In this new curriculum,

- **students would not only study academic content;**
- **they'd study themselves.**

They would not only discover the human commonalities;

- **they would discover the many ways in which humans around the world express these commonalities.**

In such a curriculum, the academic subjects would be put to larger, more consequential ends.

- **Education would become more applicable to the student,**
- **and multiculturalism would be understood within a larger context of common ground.**

CONCLUSION

Here, then, is my conclusion.

- **Let's celebrate diversity.**
- **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 is my deepest wish that

- **David, my 3-year-old grandson in Belize.**
- **and Julie, his 3-year-old cousin in New Jersey.**
 - **who speak different languages**
 - **and have different colored skins,**
- **still will grow up knowing deep down inside**
- **that regardless of their great diversity, they are, at the same time, members of the same human family.**

And to me this is what

- **social cohesion**
- **is all about.**