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CELEBRATING DIVERSITY, BUILDING COMMUNITY

by

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I've been asked to speak about two essential challenges that confront the public schools and the nation. How can we celebrate diversity and also build community? And I'd like to begin by telling you a story.

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 busy—it's an old administrative trick. On top of the heap was the student newspaper from Stanford University. And the headline announced that the faculty at Stanford had reintroduced a required course in "Western Civilization," after having abolished this requirement 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." The editors concluded with this blockbuster question: "How dare they impose uniform standards on nonuniform people?" At first I was amused, and then deeply troubled by that statement. I was troubled that some of America's most gifted students, after fourteen or more years of formal learning, still had not learned the simple truth that while we are "nonuniform," we still have many things in common. They had not discovered the fundamental truth that, with all of our diversity, there still are characteristics at the very core of our existence that bind us to each other.

This brings me to the central theme of my remarks today. It is absolutely crucial that students in colleges and schools learn about the heritage of other nations and religions, and that they also celebrate the diversity found here in the United States. We must affirm as well the uniqueness of every individual, and the rich mosaic that constitutes the human family.

But it is also my conviction that, with all of our diversity, there are commonalities that we all share. And while affirming our individualism and uniqueness, it is urgent that we discover community as well, that we discover the connections.

But with all of our differences, just what is it that we hold in common? Is there anything that still binds us to each other?

HUMAN COMMONALITIES

Several years ago in a book called *A Quest for Common Learning*, I suggested that we organize the school curriculum not on the basis of disciplines and departments, but on the basis of what I call the Human Commonalities, those universal experiences that are found among all cultures and all peoples on the planet. And I decided that there are, in fact, eight experiences that we share with people all around the world.

I. THE LIFE CYCLE

First, at the most basic level, we all share the universal human experience of birth and growth and death. And I've often thought that if you want to make connections in another culture take along a baby. The life cycle binds us to each other. It is the core of life. And yet the sad truth is that most students go through life without reflecting on the mystery of their own existence. They complete twelve or even sixteen years of formal schooling not considering the sacredness of their bodies, not learning how to sustain wellness, or pondering the imperative of death.

My wife is a certified nurse-midwife and has delivered many babies, including seven grandchildren of our own. 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. They learn about the birth process in between the labor pains.

It's really shocking that young people in America today grow up knowing more about their Walkman's or the carburetor of a car than they do about the characteristics of their own bodies.

If I were reshaping the school curriculum, I'd have one major strand of study called the "Life Cycle" at the very core of common learning. I'd have students consider how the experience of the life cycle varies from one culture to another, discovering both differences and connections.

II. LANGUAGE

This brings me to the second common thread that binds people together. In addition to the life cycle, all people on the planet also use symbols to express feelings and ideas. First comes life, then language. Our sophisticated use of symbols sets human beings apart from all other forms of life. It's through the miracle of 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 encouraged that you're looking in my direction! But I've been a teacher far too long to confuse visual contact with cerebral interaction.

I'm suggesting that language is not just another subject, it's the means by which all other subjects are pursued. And the new curriculum should include a second strand called the "Use of Symbols." I'd also like to see every student become proficient in a language other than their own.

But, above all, all students in our schools should be asked to consider the ethics of communication. I'm suggesting that to be an educated person means writing with clarity, reading with comprehension, being able to effectively speak and listen.

But beyond all this, education for the next century also means helping students understand that language is a sacred 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 the third core commonality. Beyond the life cycle and beyond the use of symbols, all people on the planet respond to the aesthetic. If you want to make connections in another culture, and you can't take a baby, take a flute. Music is a universal language. Dance is a universal language. Architecture is a universal language. Painting and sculpture are languages that can be understood all around the world.

Consider how Salvador Dali's painting "The Persistence of Memory" can profoundly communicate to any person haunted by the relentless passage of time. Consider how the gospel song "Amazing Grace" can stir a common bond among people whether they are from Appalachia or Manhattan. Consider how "We Shall Overcome," when sung in slow and solemn cadence, can stir powerful feelings, regardless of race or economic status.

I find it significant that archaeologists, when they study past civilizations, examine the artifacts of art—the pottery, cave paintings, and musical instruments—to determine the quality of a culture.

The arts are, above all, the special language of children, who even before they learn to speak, respond intuitively to dance, music, and color. And the arts are uniquely helpful to children who are disabled. Years ago I taught children who were deaf. They couldn't speak because they couldn't hear, but through painting and sculpture and movement and rhythm they discovered self-expression.

And the simple fact is that every student who enrolls in school has the innate urge and capacity to be artistically expressive. It's really tragic that, for most children,

the universal language of the arts is suppressed and then destroyed in the early years of learning because school boards consider art a frill.

I'm suggesting that for the most intimate, most profound, and most moving experiences in our lives, we turn to music and dance and to the visual arts to express feelings and ideas words cannot convey. And this is true for all people on the planet.

IV. TIME AND SPACE

This brings me to the fourth human commonality. While we are all nonuniform and while we differ dramatically from each other, the simple truth is that all people on the planet have the marvelous capacity to place themselves in time and space. We can recall the past and anticipate the future. And yet, how often we squander this truly awesome capacity to look in both directions, even neglecting our own roots.

Looking back, the most important mentor in my own life was my Grandpa Boyer, who lived to be one hundred. Grandpa, at the age of forty, moved his little family into the slums of Dayton, Ohio. He then spent the next forty years working for the poor, teaching me more by deed than word that to be truly human one must serve. And yet, for far too many children, the influence of these intergenerational models has diminished.

Margaret Mead said that the health of any culture is sustained when three generations are vitally interacting with each other—a "vertical culture" in which the different age groups are connected. And yet in America today we're creating what might be called a horizontal culture, with each generation living all alone. Infants are in nurseries, toddlers are in day care, and older children are in schools organized by age. College students are isolated on campuses. Adults are in the workplace. And older citizens are in retirement villages.

For several years, my own parents lived in a retirement village where the average age was eighty, but they also had a day care center there, and all the three-

and four-year-olds had adopted grandparents to meet with every day and have a sense of bonding. I'm convinced the time has come to break up the age ghettos. It's time to build intergenerational institutions that bring the old and young together. And in the new core curriculum—with a strand called "Time and Space"—students should discover their own roots and complete, perhaps, an oral history.

Beyond their own extended family, students also should study Western civilization to understand our past, and they should study non-Western cultures to understand our future.

I'm suggesting that a truly educated person understands that all people on the planet place themselves in time and space. It is a miracle we all share.

V. GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS

This brings me to the fifth core commonality. In addition to the life cycle, the use of symbols, the response to the aesthetic, and our shared sense of time, all people on the planet also hold membership in groups and institutions that consequentially shape their lives.

Our son Craig lives in a Mayan village in the jungles of Belize with his Mayan wife and four children. When we visit Craig each year, I'm impressed that Mayans and Americans carry on their work in very basic, similar ways. The jungles of Manhattan and the jungles of Belize are separated by a thousand miles and a thousand years, and yet 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. At one level it's all very different, but at another level it's all very much the same.

I'm suggesting that we all hold membership in groups and institutions, and that all students should not only be introduced to the web of institutions in their own lives,

but also engage in cross-cultural studies, which would compare, for example, Santa Cruz, California, with Santa Cruz, Belize.

VI. WORK

This brings me to human commonality number six.

The simple truth is that, with all our differences, all people on the planet spend their time producing and consuming. And yet today's young people grow up in a culture preoccupied with consuming, with little understanding of what it means to actually produce. Today students may see their parents bring papers home at night and carry more papers off in the morning, and never know what is it exactly that parents do?

When I was Chancellor of the State University of New York, I took our youngest son, who was eight, to our cabin in the Berkshires on a weekend. My goal was to build a dock, and all day, instead of playing, Stephen sat at the water's edge, watching me do things I'd never done before (and hearing me say things I'd never said before). That evening, as we drove home, Stephen was quite pensive, and finally, after several miles, he said, "Daddy, I wish you'd have grown up to be a carpenter instead of you-know-what!"

I'm convinced that a new curriculum for the schools might also include a strand called "Producing and Consuming," that would help students discover the dignity of work.

Several years ago, when Kay and I were in China, we were told about a student who had defaced the surface of his desk. As punishment, he spent three days in the factory where the desks were made, helping the craftsmen and observing the painstaking effort that was involved. And we were told that, not surprisingly, the student never defaced a desk again.

I'm suggesting that the new human commonalities curriculum might include a study of producing, consuming, and conserving, helping students learn how these universal experiences differ from one culture to another.

VII. NATURAL WORLD

This brings me to commonality number seven.

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. To be truly educated for the next century means understanding our connectedness to nature.

David, my five-year-old grandson in Belize, understands these connections very well as he chases birds, bathes in the river, and watches corn being picked, pounded into tortillas, and heated over an open fire. But David's cousins who live in Boston and in Princeton, with the appliances, and asphalt roadways, and precooked food, find it enormously more difficult to discover their connectedness 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 students, so children could understand a little more about their world and what they must know to live. The program subsequently was funded and called *3-2-1 Contact*.

In doing background work for that project, they surveyed some junior high school students in New York City, and asked such questions as: "Where does water come from?" A disturbing number said, "The faucet." And they asked, "Where does light come from?" The students said, "The switch." And they asked, "Where does garbage go?" "Down the chute." The students' sense of connections went about as far as the VCR, the refrigerator door, and the light switch on the wall.

I'm suggesting that with all of our differences, every single one of us is inextricably connected to the natural world. And students should discover that our very survival on this planet means preserving the earth home we share together.

VIII. SEARCH FOR MEANING

This brings me to the eighth commonality.

All people on the planet, regardless of their 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 be whole unless he be committed. He cannot find himself unless he find a purpose beyond himself." And, when all is said and done, to be truly educated means examining one's own values and beliefs and considering, with respect, the values of religious traditions of other cultures, too.

During our study of the American high school, I became convinced that we have not just a school problem, but a youth problem in this country. I was struck that too many teenagers feel unwanted, unneeded, and unconnected to the larger world. Without guidance and direction, they lose their sense of purpose at a very early age.

The poet Vachel Lindsay wrote: "It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull, / Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap, / Not that they serve, but have no gods to serve, / Not that they die but that they die like sheep." The tragedy is not death. The tragedy is to die with commitments undefined, convictions undeclared, and service unfulfilled.

And with all the controversy that surrounds it, I'm convinced that a school is a place where values are examined not by dictating answers, but by making honorable the quest. And I'm also convinced that this search for meaning is most effectively conveyed in schools by great teachers who model values in their lives. Values can also be taught through service. And I'm convinced that all students should complete a

community service project working in day care centers, retirement villages, or tutoring other kids at school.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "Everyone can be great, because everyone can serve." And I'm convinced the young people of this country are ready to be inspired by a larger vision.

This afternoon I've suggested that while we are all different, we also are very much alike. We are all born and live and die. We all send messages to each other. We all respond to the aesthetic. We all recall the past and anticipate the future. We all are members of groups and institutions. We all are an inseparable part of nature. We all engage in producing and consuming. And we seek to give meaning to our lives.

Here then is my conclusion.

Let's celebrate diversity. Let's reaffirm community. But let's also acknowledge that terrible injustices still persist and pledge to work together to build for all of us, and especially for our children, a better world.

Langston Hughes, in his timeless verse, brought the nation's 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— / And then run? / Maybe it just sags / Like a heavy load, / *Or does it explode?*" Why is it that we can fund space stations and bail out the S&Ls, yet never seem to have money for our children?

I'm troubled that hundreds of thousands of little babies in this country do not have good nutrition because the federal WIC program is underfunded. And it's a national disgrace that the federal Head Start program, which prepares disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds for school, serves less than half those eligible because of lack of money. And I'm enormously troubled by the growing gap 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.

But I'd also like to underscore the point that it's absolutely impossible to achieve a true spirit of community without also achieving human justice, since the two are inextricably interlocked. And my hope would be that education would help students celebrate diversity while building community, as well.

I do not expect miracles overnight. Still, I do believe that most people would rather love than hate, and would rather live by hope than doubt. It is my greatest wish that David, my five-year-old grandson in Belize, and Julie, his five-year-old cousin who lives in Princeton, even though they live far apart, will grow up firmly believing that deep down inside they truly are members of the same human family. What I pray is that they will celebrate diversity and affirm their commonalities as well.