

The Bigness of Education

By Patricia F. Carini

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This lecture catches me between two worlds: the world of “now” in the schools and the world that was happening 40 and more years ago when the Prospect School opened its doors. As it turned out, 1965 was an auspicious moment to launch a school, ushering in as it did an era in which there was burgeoning hope for revitalizing the society and the nation’s schools. There was a growing confidence among educators and social activists from all sectors that a society more open, more pluralistic, more diversely textured was possible, with the public schools a major contributor to the accomplishment of that aim. New visions of schools flourished—less rigid, better able to engage children in their own learning, roomy enough to comfortably include the full spectrum of the nation’s children. Hope flourished—hope that the schools could make a liberating education a reality for all children.

In one of the most important policy documents of that era, the Vermont Design for Education (1968/1971), this commitment to the positive value of difference and to the wide distribution of human capacity is a cohering thread across the 17 educational premises set forth in its brief 25 pages. When I reread the Design a couple of years ago, after a lapse of 20 years or more, every page returned me to that commitment. Equally, every page posed a challenge to the “now” world in which standardization, uniformity, and deficiency are the educational watchwords. Here is one of many passages that caught my eye (1971):

Students are as diverse intellectually as they are physically, having different backgrounds and experiences, feelings, ways of thinking, personalities, and ways of working and learning. In order to be effective, schools must allow and encourage students to work at their own rate, to develop their own unique style of learning... Learning experiences must be geared to individual needs rather than group norms (p. 10).

And then this key sentence, addressing the school to its mission (1971):

The school’s function is to expand the differences between individuals and create a respect for those differences (p. 6).

Think of it. Think of the boldness of that assertion. Think of it especially in the context of now. The function of the school asserted in the Design, was not, as now, to establish group norms, to ferret out deficiencies and to enforce compliance with those norms. Its aim was not to prune each and every child to fit a standardized, one size fits all model of schooling. Instead the focus was on the uniqueness each child brings and on the school’s responsibility to respond to and nurture that uniqueness. What was to be valued was not sameness, but what distinguishes each child, and the richness these differences contribute to the whole.

Or, in the context of the exploitative and rigid testing system that in the world of now holds each child to the same standard, consider what was being strived for in that other world of forty years ago. In the words of the Vermont Design (1971),

Evaluations based upon standardized expectancies force students to adopt standardized learning in order to compete. Many of today's expectancies are influenced by publishing concerns and hardware vendors. We must develop personalized ways of assessing an individual's progress, his strengths and weaknesses, keeping in mind that the ultimate purpose of evaluation is to strengthen the learning process (p. 14).

In the future world projected in the Vermont Design, the approach to what in the world of "now" is called "accountability" was outspoken in its flat rejection of pandering to so-called research-based methods or the profit-motivated textbook and testing industry. The role of evaluation, in keeping with the word 'value' at its root, was to support the child's learning process, and specifically to do that by maximizing the child's own strengths as a learner.

(Prospect: particularizing the Vermont Design)

At Prospect, we took these ideas seriously, and in important respects, anticipated and also particularized them. To have confidence in each child's inherent desire to learn. To make room for each child's interests and ways of learning. To provide a rich environment of natural materials responsive to each child as a maker of sense and meaning. These were all guiding principles at Prospect. Like the era in which it was conceived, Prospect enacted a belief and confidence in the capacity of children—all children—to learn and to think, to be in Dewey's terms, active agents in their own education.

Those principles and beliefs had consequences in how education and the function of the school were understood and enacted. At Prospect, it meant that learning to read and other academic instruction was individualized in order to respond aptly and positively to each child's modes of learning, without pitting one child against another. To do that meant getting to know the child, with attention to each one's particularized strengths and interests, and to the standards held by each for her own work. It meant opportunity for teachers to see the children in action, with a sustained focus on children as makers and doers, and a parallel commitment to provide the materials and time for children to exercise these capacities on a daily basis. In practice, it meant giving children choices of materials and activities and then to leave it largely to the child to decide what to make or do.

Observing children in action doing these things—making choices, building, drawing, sewing, cooking, painting, writing—we were overwhelmed by their productivity and equally by their persistence and inventiveness. The following images, though each an isolated moment, offer glimpses of that productivity and of some of the materials available at Prospect throughout the school day and specifically for what we called "choice" or "activity" time.

These felt figures, cut, glued, and sewed together, the work of a five year old girl: first the bride, then the groom and children—and finally the house.

A sculpture modeled from clay, here being given the finishing touches, the creation of a 9 nine year old boy.

A block marble chute, the work of several hands, one of hundreds or perhaps thousands made by generations of children at Prospect School.

A braided candle, the novel creation of a nimble fingered 9 year old, who then made a second, tiny one just to see if she could do it.

This dramatic painting of a black tree on a black ground, painted by a 5 year old boy.

A sand sculpture, resonant with Mayan culture, made by four boys, ages 8 and 9 working with wet sand.

This mural size painting by a twelve year old boy, from first strokes, to filling in the pattern, to completion. (first image of mural, second image, third image)

This poem by a twelve year old girl, called “Hope for Life.”

Among the ashes and rubble
 Where all life is gone
 And death is upon us
 I spy a single blade of grass
 So green and healthy
 It made me think
 There may still be
 Hope for life.
 (RE 12.24)

The school itself, built circa 1834, added to higglety-pigglety over the years, was scuffed and shabby. This wasn't a rich school. It was always a small school, never much larger than 100 children, and more typically 65 or 70, grouped in multiage classes of 23 or 24 in the lower groups, somewhat fewer in the middle school, usually spanning 3 years, and by design with overlapping ages: 4 1/2—7, 7—10; 10—13. Started under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the same legislation that today sponsors NCLB, the original idea was that Prospect would become a wing of the public schools. That didn't happen, but the commitment to admit children from all walks of life, regardless of ability to pay, and the dedication to public education remained high and firm priorities until, tragically, the school, always financially precarious, was forced to close in 1991.

For the staff at the school, all the making and doing glimpsed in the images just shown meant the opportunity to see not only what the children made, and how they made it, but to recognize the mediums and large human themes that captured their imaginations and minds. It meant that the curriculum of the school, inspired by the children's projects and questions was ever in the making, with teachers partners in carrying forward from the children's lead.

Watching the children's intense engagement with these open-ended materials, seemingly so self-propelling, how could our interest not be aroused? How could we not as a staff pursue these observations, and learn from them?

In cameo, and in no particular order, I offer a sampling of what we learned from that pursuit. We learned, for example, that when there is abundant opportunity for making to happen, what one child makes, inspires others—that works build on works. And further, that in the process, boundaries for what it is possible to do (and learn) are stretched, broken, and redrawn. In other words, the braided candle, the wet sand sculpture, the block marble chutes broke new pathways in what it is possible to do with wax, sand, and blocks, not only for the original makers, but for others. An idea originates. It is adopted and adapted, achieving a public status. It continues, or even seems to lie fallow, and then reappears with new verve, sparking another burst of enthusiastic making and remaking. In brief, in the making of things, as in the doing of work, new standards are born.

We learned that no matter how many stacks of drawings of suns or trees or houses we looked at, there were never two that were the same, including as is evident from this sampling of suns in (Emma's) collection, those drawn by the same child. In this picture at age 5, a yellow sun, green features and dynamic orange rays (RE B5.6). Here, a different variation—a red sun encircled by dots, age 6 (RE 6.153). Yet another, at age 7, a yellow sun encircled by a broad band of yellow, lightly masked by flicking lines suggestive of wind or cloud (RE 7.0). Age 8, the sun again encircled though by a narrower band, its face averted as tears flow in apparent response to the smog or smoke of the city (RE 8.81). And, here, at age 13, a light orange sun floats amidst pastel clouds in a pastoral landscape (RE 13.200).

We learned, variations notwithstanding, that any particular child's works from first to last bear that child's signature, even as what is made also changes in complexity and dimension. As (Emma's) suns give the merest hint, witnessing a child's works across a span of as much as 9 years is to be the privileged witness to a perspective, a self in the making—in the words of political philosopher, Isaiah Berlin (1969/88), a self “unpredictably self-transforming” (p. 171). And to an aesthetic identifiably this child's and no other's. Among what was gleaned from this discovery is that a child's early works, and the preferences, interests, and modes of learning expressed in them, provide a reliable compass to the future. From that understanding it followed that the school's essential and positive role is to recognize, support and develop these continuities while simultaneously expanding opportunities for widened experience.

We learned, too, that the natural world, including animals, holds such intense interest for so many children that it is inexhaustible in its curricular potential, providing rich learning opportunities for children of all ages, with no apparent upper age limit. Here that interest is expressed by a young child drawing a cricket from life and in this piece of observational writing by a 9 year old describing a bog:

The bog is a foggy type of place. Part of it is wet and the other part is sort of dry. It's big and full of things to eat like golden thread and wintergreen berries two very good things. Some of it is like a dream land and it's hard to climb the hill to get to the bog. When you go there you want [to] stay until you check every trail. It's got so many seeds and vines, trees and bushes, I really like it there (RE 9.24)

This sampling of the learning that happened at Prospect is the kind I think of as generative; that is, it was big learning—learning that led us to reflect and study together, opening up in the process further questions and so broadening our avenues of inquiry. As a staff, and in seminars inclusive of parents, interns in Prospect’s post-B.A. teacher education program, and others from the surrounding community, this learning led to recollections of ourselves as makers and doers, both as children and later in our lives.

With a certain inevitability, these reflections and recollections, together with the children’s works and our observations of them as makers, called our attention to the making of works on the wider human scale, prompting yet further questions. What does it say about humanness that it isn’t only children but people everywhere who are makers, across cultures, and stretching back as far as 30,000 years to the paintings preserved in the caves of Southern France? What does it mean about us that wherever people have trod they have, for good or for ill, left their mark on the world? What collectively does this driving desire to make and remake the world mean about humanness and about learning and about educating?

The larger idea propelling this inquiry was the conviction that a school itself could generate knowledge of children, of curriculum, of teaching and of learning. It was in this context that I, and others at Prospect, began to collect children’s works that were left in school and to organize them. It was also the context in which Prospect developed processes for describing children and their works, not to judge or score them but to make visible a child’s abiding interests, a child’s preferred modes of learning, a child’s contributions to the life of the classroom.

Within the daily life of the school, the aim of these descriptive processes was straightforward: to have the observations, the yield from our inquiries, fold directly into practice, and specifically, and in concert with the Vermont Design, in support of the child’s learning process. In this respect, the teacher’s and others’ observations of the child in action, making choices, creating works, and the works themselves were inextricably woven together.

By 1971—6 years after Prospect first opened its doors and 3 years after the Vermont Design was first published—these habits of observing, of collecting children’s works, of teachers keeping daily notes and writing brief narrative records weekly for each child were well established at Prospect, as was the practice of documenting and examining the curriculum for each class grouping and for the school as a whole. Within the next 5 years all these practices and processes would be shared far beyond Prospect’s borders, through Prospect’s summer institutes for teachers, the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation, and consultations with schools throughout the country.

It was exciting. It was intense. It was demanding. There were the usual ups and downs of daily life in a school, there were crises, there were setbacks. A very small school operating on a tiny budget, we were always over-stretched—and all the while, we were learning, learning, learning—often by trial and error and from our own mistakes, always by reflecting and re-examining. The school, the documenting, the hours spent describing children and the works they made—all this was a labor of love. Intensive labor, labor that, in time, yielded the abundant archives this occasion celebrates, a legacy now housed here at UVM.

(a chapter in the struggle for the rights of the child)

I could burnish these memories and make them shine—a golden moment, a wondrous past era, from which now only the afterglow remains. I could—but it wouldn't be true. And on two counts. The first of these is that the vision of the schools expressed in principle in the Vermont Design, and enacted at Prospect and many, many other schools here in Vermont and throughout the nation, was never fully realized—not on a wide scale and not even in a single location. It is equally the case that the vision enacted then, the large ideas fueling it, the hopes for a more pluralistic, more heterodox society, and schools of matching embrace and flexibility, are not over and done with, but are still with us.

The era I have called attention to even as it was happening was marred, as are all things human, by imperfections and mistakes. That is to be expected. Yet, with all its flaws it also composed a chapter in the long history of struggle for human rights, and specifically to the long history of struggle for the rights of each child and all to a nurturing and liberating education. Like the struggles for fair labor laws and regulation of child labor; for the pure food and drug act; for women's suffrage; for social justice; for social security more generally, the struggles of the 70s kept alive and breathed new life into the larger struggle for a democratic society in which government is premised on and serves the the people—and not the other way round.

If those struggles, and others that preceded them, were altogether failed or eclipsed, I wouldn't be standing here speaking with you today. Of far greater significance, there wouldn't be teachers here in Vermont and throughout the nation continuing to strive against all odds in the venal and destructive times of “now” to make room for children's own interests, for choice, for some degree of freedom in the learning process. And there most assuredly are such valiant teachers—some of them in this room.

Struggles. Struggles worthy of the cost. Struggles that didn't accomplish everything—but did accomplish something. Struggles that at times upended the status quo—as did the decentralizing of the New York City public schools in the 70s. Also in New York City, there was the challenge to the regimented and tracked public schools posed by Lillian Weber and the Open Corridor program. There was the conceptualizing of Headstart, the New York State Pre-Kindergarten, and National Follow Through that framed the child's education in terms larger than testable achievement, that gave equal weight or more to the child's health, nutrition, safety and well-being—and to partnerships with parents.

Vermont's Design for Education, though it was never implemented fully, nevertheless fueled lively debate across this state, and aroused significant interest in other locations. It was considered by many outside Vermont's borders to be a model of how a state agency could frame a coherent philosophy, with assurance of financial assistance for those districts who chose to participate, yet not mandate forced compliance by all. In the words of the Design (1971):

It should be emphasized that acceptance of this philosophy and its implementation must be voluntary if there are to be improved learning opportunities in the schools. No amount of legislation or administrativemandate will provide beneficial and permanent educational changes for students (p. 25)

In keeping with those words, so refreshing at a time when mandated compliance is the name of the game, local communities were encouraged to create their own designs reflective of local needs and aspirations.

(now)

By my own reckoning, the era reflected in educational policy by the Vermont Design, and at ground level and in the particular, by schools like Prospect, ended with “the reports” of the Reagan years. Insidiously, the reports inserted into public discourse the idea of public education itself not as a right guaranteed to all the nation’s children but as an “experiment”—an experiment that had not proved itself, and perhaps had outlived its usefulness. This rhetoric, and the generalized, unsubstantiated claim of failed schools, prepared the ground for vouchers and the privatization of public education, and most recently for the federal mandates that define and are the sharp, biting teeth of the legislation known as “No Child Left Behind.” We find ourselves now, in 2007, a quarter of a century out from “the reports,” and 6 years into the Bush presidency, with the pressure on schools, children, families, teachers risen to such a pitch that it is unrelenting. Here and there I detect some signs of weariness with high stakes testing as there are also signs of weariness with war and with an economy that privileges 1% of the population at the expense of all the rest. At the state level, Nebraska has firmly rejected NCLB in favor of local control and local leadership. Here in Vermont, with bills in both House and Senate, there are also leanings in that direction. Indeed, advocacy for the dismantling of NCLB has come from many quarters in recent months. Across the spectrum of those speaking out, the consistency in the terms of their opposition is notable.

For example, there is the sharp, and increasingly voiced critique that NCLB penalizes and punishes the very children it was supposed to help: children historically denied access to educational opportunities; that is, those living in areas of concentrated poverty, most of them children of color. Charter Schools, vaunted as a solution for these very children are too often in practice highly selective in their admissions, tending to exclude children who score low or who are labeled trouble-makers. Meanwhile, schools under sanction for failing to raise test scores, are short of teachers and unable, as in New Orleans, to respond to the numbers of children who have failed to be accepted in the city’s 17 new Charter Schools.

With pressure to show Adequate Yearly Progress, federal and state mandates have savaged the curriculum, severing the arts, literature, history, geography, and science in order to apply every minute to raising reading and math scores. A big education, responsive to the individual needs and interests of the children, is eclipsed by skills drill. Punishment and negativity are the bywords of NCLB, with teachers under surveillance, schools under threat of takeover, and children the ultimate victims of a high stakes, high pressure testing system relentless in its application. In pursuit of scores at all costs, in too many schools coaching for tests has effectively replaced teaching.

The drop out rate is rising at the same time that upward economic mobility is ever more tightly tied to attainment of a college degree. Local control of the schools is drastically diminished and local knowledge dismissed. Parents, far from being treated as partners in their child’s education, are largely left out of the picture.

For all this, what passes mostly unnoticed and unremarked is the naked fact of a wealthy nation that fails at every level to protect and nurture its own children, that has the dishonorable distinction of one of the highest infant mortality rates of any of the world’s richest nations; that ranks among the lowest in provision of

health care, accessible, quality day care facilities, and children's safety; that has among the highest levels of poverty and inequality.

It is an ugly picture reflective of a desperate time in education, and in the nation. Yet, as a recent statement from the American Association of School Administrators (2007) asserts, the president's position on NCLB, as announced in his State of the Union parallels precisely his position on Iraq: "Stay the course." I quote:

The president holds fast to the idea that "accountability" must be pursued by a coercive process of federal oversight built upon a few rewards and a great deal of punishment, and his unbending belief that student achievement is the equivalent of a single test given to every child every year.

A young woman from a Denver high school under threat of closure due to dwindling numbers and under performance, succinctly sums up the situation in a couplet sent to the newly appointed superintendent of schools in Denver, and quoted in the January 15, 2007 New Yorker.

You might as well put us in jail because your plan sets us up to fail (p. 47).

The great tragedy of this disaster is that the devastating results were predictable. The test that can't be manipulated doesn't exist. A child-proof method for teaching reading if it were findable would most assuredly have been discovered by now. Schools under the gun have long been adept at discovering means for dispensing with children who don't "fit," and who, by not fitting, place the school itself at risk. Children rejected by school not at all surprisingly don't stay and they don't graduate. Institutionalized punishment and punitive measures breed what they always breed: obsequiousness, distrust and anger.

This, in broad strokes, describes as I see it the current state of affairs in education. A failure in policy, and a failure predictable in advance of its implementation—not unlike the tragedy of the failed policy for going to war in Iraq, also predictable in advance.

The picture of the impact of NCLB on actual schools in actual communities with the education of very real children at stake, because these are particular, because they are up close, is far sadder, far more disturbing. I offer a single example, a story from one such school, told, with her permission, in the words of reading teacher, Betsy Wice.

Betsy begins her story with how things stand at her school, now in 2007. In her words (2/07): "No Child Left Behind," with its Reading First mandates has effectively dismantled a rich literacy program at my school, Frederick Douglass School in Philadelphia..." a school that Betsy tells us has "a long history of passionate readers," dating that "history back to its founding in the 1920s by a black anthropologist and activist, Arthur Huff Fausett... [who created] a rigorous dual curriculum, Negro studies and regular studies... [writing] his own textbook, For Freedom, the first Black history text for elementary students."

Inserting her own story as a teacher at Douglass in this larger historical context, Betsy tells us, and I quote, "When I came to Douglass in 1981, the school had maintained its pride in the Black heritage through all kinds of extra projects that involved teachers, kids, and families for many, many hours beyond the school day: oratorical contests, a championship chess team, music lessons, t.v. productions." Carrying this history

and heritage forward, Betsy describes how in the 1980s and 90s, “energy and time was poured into getting grants to run a literacy-based after school program, and a school bookstore, to establish a silk screening studio, to send our older kids to a 3-day, 2 night environmental school in the country, to provision our classrooms with a wealth of up-to- date children’s literature (especially by African-American authors), to set up a parent program for take-home reading.”

Betsy tells how she loved teaching in this vibrant environment, how she loved, in her words, “using the collection of class sets of extra books—a magical book closet that eventually came to house 400 different titles of outstanding children’s fiction and non- fiction. I could take a set of *Bridge to Terebithia* to read 3 times a week with the fifth- graders... A sixth grade class could spend a month with *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and then create a stage show for the whole school. A fourth grade colleague immersed her students in our wealth of stories of the Underground Railroad and then produced an original show that took our breath away. I still can hear Samiria, cast as a young woman who drowns in the Ohio River, singing “*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*,” dressed as an angel, her voice soaring over us from the back of the auditorium.”

And it wasn’t only literature, art, and history that breathed life into the curriculum. Betsy tells us, “When April came ‘round we shared our set of Sylvia Johnson’s text *Silkworms*, as we raised our own creatures, feeding them mulberry leaves from neighborhood trees (all ages participated). In May we incubated chick eggs... with sets of research books on embryology to use at different grade levels.”

What I have just read is the magical part, the part when possibility and excitement could be counted upon. The part when staff and parents could band together to create opportunities that far exceeded the standard curriculum. And then it changed. Betsy writes, “I’m still teaching reading at Douglass but it’s so different. The wonderful class sets [of books] tend to gather dust in the closet because the literacy block is so circumscribed with mandated so-called ‘research-based’ scripted programs such as Voyager Universal Literacy and pullout interventions such as *Fast ForWord* (a so-called reading program that uses computer games and no books at all, eating up hours and hours of valuable teaching time). So much time must be spent on DIBELS testing and Benchmark testing and Pennsylvania State System of Assessment testing and TerraNova testing... there’s hardly time to squeeze in the mandated scripted programs, let alone real books, real science, real art.

I began with the generalized negative response to NCLB and to the despair felt in the schools, a devastation which Betsy’s story tells in the particular and at ground level. I tell it also as a story of the particularized history of a so-called “failed school.” I tell it as the urban story of a proud, vital public school intersecting the story of Vermont’s progressive history and Prospect’s.

(affirming the immeasurable self/affirming the bigness of education)

I may measure a child’s height in inches. I may measure her weight in pounds. I can train a child to perform. I can insist that a child learn a prescribed set of lessons and say them back on command. I may ascertain that she can read the word, “and,” and he can write a paragraph that conforms to current standards. I can put my full attention on what a child doesn’t know and can’t do and insist on lockstep drills to fill the gaps I perceive. From the evidence, it is even possible, within limits, to force a child to learn through fear,

intimidation, or reprisal. In other words, if I have the stomach for it, I can forcibly externalize the child's learning to measurable achievements and in doing so, allow these narrow goals to fill the educational screen.

Yet try as I may, there will be children who don't and won't and can't learn in this stifling climate of control with its demand for rigid adherence to external commands. Some will rebel. Some will become masters of passive resistance. Some will go through the motions—slowly. Most by the standard imposed and the narrowness of its scope will be judged to be deficient, not capable of learning, disabled. And most so judged will be poor children, children of color, children for whom English is not their first language, children crowded into grossly under-funded and under-resourced schools. It should not go unnoticed, however, that all children, even those who comply, who to an acceptable degree measure up, will be denied an education worthy of the name: a liberating education that honors each child's and every child's capacity for freedom of mind and for choice.

For however many scores I compute and standards I impose, I will be missing an essential feature: the child's own energetic engagement with the world; the child's burning desire to learn; the child's own pursuit of dreams perhaps as yet un-nameable to her; the child's own capacity to think for herself, to weigh alternatives, to make choices. In brief, what I will be missing is the child's own self in action. Missing the child, I lose my particularized compass to the large meaning of education—education spacious enough to respond to the bigness of human capacity and its abundant variety. It is hearing Samiria singing, it is reading Alva's poem, it is seeing Emma's suns, it is watching generations of children building with blocks, each the inheritor of boundary-breaking efforts antecedent to their own, that point the way to what a big education, embracing each child and all, can be and look like.

For if I do not see the child freely and imaginatively engaged, how am I to see what she has to contribute now and where her path into the future is tending? How am I otherwise to understand that an education spacious enough for the all the Samirias, Alvas, and Emmas, all the other builders and makers, thinkers and learners has to be big with opportunities for expression of the complexity of each one's questions, passions and capacities—and for those of all? If I lose sight of the child and the child's capacities, how am I to understand that standards imposed in advance miss the larger point of the child's own standards—standards inherent to the child's own learning and integral to the work at hand?

How, without the child before me, am I to grasp the reality that, in practice, this requires classrooms and schools rich in open-ended materials, rich in opportunities to grapple with issues and ideas, rich in real literature, in real science, and history and geography and mathematics? A richness described by Betsy Wice in her story of Frederick Douglass school and its history, and made visible in the children's works from Prospect.

When I speak of the bigness of education, I am speaking of an education responsive to the bigness and complexity of human-ness itself. I am speaking of an education that starts from human capacity, spanning the history of the species and represented across cultures worldwide, for making and remaking a human world.

It is delicate work to do big educating, to educate the young to their capacities, to their dignity, and to their responsibilities, with the high aim of guiding, but not controlling, of tempering will without destroying the

spirit. As Vito Perrone, founder of the North Dakota Study Group, tells us (1998), it is what raises teaching to its highest potential and makes of it, “an essentially moral and intellectual endeavor... an endeavor emanating from the heart (p. 2).” It is the education and learning I referred to in a talk I gave last fall (11/06), that includes the following paragraph, which also appears on the poster for this lecture:

Big learning, learning that propels a learner to new heights or sustains the stamina to dig deeper is immeasurable. To reduce learning to measurable achievement according to standards external to that learning degrades the learner and shames the school. When that happens, tiny ideas, generalized conventional wisdom, and wing-clipping adherence to rules trump variety, roominess of thought, the generative potency of imagination—in short, the particularized perspective each learner brings to the world.

A perspective, a way of being each of us in turn contributes to the benefit of all, establishing through the variety and richness of our multiplied perspectives, the bedrock of a community of thinkers, learners, dreamers, inventors—teachers. That is, a community of makers, at one and the same time inheritors and creators of a human world.

It is for all these reasons that I choose recognition of the self in others as cornerstone for a philosophy of education big enough to match the bigness and complexity of humanness itself. I also choose it for another reason, implied in what I have said throughout this talk, though not stated explicitly. I do so now. It is the recognition of the self in others that is foundational to any democracy worthy of the name. For without that recognition such principles as the equality of opportunity for all and the freedom of all to exercise some degree of control over their own destinies are hollow at the core—as, tragically, these principles have been from the moment they were first proclaimed.

For if I am denied a self, if I am deemed a lesser being, if I can make no claim to human feelings and capacities on a par with those who hold power, then what is to stop the powerful ones from doing with me whatever they want—and to justify it on grounds that I am less than fully human? At the extreme, and this country’s history is marred irrevocably by such extremes, the denial of self to a person—or category of persons—justifies and has justified vile infringements of human rights, including slavery, torture, rape, murder and genocide.

As that record attests, if the claim to self-hood of a person or a people is called into question or denied, all bets are off. Here I turn gratefully as I have so many times before to Isaiah Berlin (1969/1988), who relating self-hood to freedom tells us, “Conceptions of freedom derive directly from the view of what constitutes a self, a person.” To which he adds these cogent words: “Enough manipulation with [that] definition and freedom can be made to mean whatever the manipulator wishes (p. 134).”

It is for all these reasons that I offer the paired ideas of the self in all its rich, non-duplicative variety and the bigness of human capacity and its wide distribution to renew and invigorate the struggle to make equality and freedom for all a reality. In particular, I offer these ideas as the starting place for the conceptualization of a public education big enough to make room for each child, and freely and equally available to all. With these words, I join the political and educational spheres. For surely it is trust in the capacity of the people and its wide distribution that is taproot for a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” For if the people are deemed incapable and unable to think for themselves, if

the children can't be trusted to learn, if no one measures up, then I have to ask: what bars the way of authoritarian rule by those who represent themselves as saviors of the republic, able better than you or I or all of us together to decide how goes the education of our children—and how goes the nation?

(“In times of crisis we summon our strength”)

Embracing the immeasurable self, affirming a bigness of education matched to the wide distribution of human capacity, I turn to these words of the poet, Muriel Rukeyser (1949/96), who tells us,

In times of crisis we summon up our strength. Then if we are lucky, we are able to call up every resource, every forgotten image that can leap to our quickening, every memory that can make us know our power... In times of crisis of the spirit, we are aware of all our need, our need for each other and our need for our selves. We call up, with all the strength of summoning we have, our fullness. And then we turn; for it is a turning for which we have prepared; and act (p.1).

With those words I turn the pages of this talk back to where I began. In education, in the schools, in the society now is indeed the time to “call up every memory that can make us know our power.” Now is indeed the time “to call up with all the strength of our summoning, our fullness.” For the time of turning, the time to act, is upon us—the time when, as Rukeyser says, “every forgotten image that can leap to our quickening” will be needed. Now is the time to awaken the memory of the history of struggle for schools inspired by confidence in the children, and by confidence in our collective capacity to be makers of a more humane society.

Now is the time to get the Vermont Design, with its vision of a liberating education for all, back in circulation.

Now is the time, in whatever ways possible for teachers and the schools, even in these dark days, to create some margins and corners, however small, for children to play, to explore, to experience some delight in learning

Now is the time to speak out for assessing the State of the Union not by its might and wealth but in the terms of its stewardship for the well-being and security of the nation's children, including universal health care and equalized educational opportunity.

Now is the time to reject the language of deficiency, of failed schools, of test scores as the measure of the child's learning.

Now is the time to insist on and to learn to speak a language worthy of the child's self-hood, worthy of the dignity of teaching, worthy of the history of proud public schools like Frederick Douglass.

For to speak a language worthy of the child, of the teacher, of the family is to restore to the child, to the teacher, to the family dignity, self-hood, hope of the future. It is a positive act of caring and of love for the child—and for our selves as guardians of the child's well-being. In support of that learning and that caring, it is my hope, and that of all at Prospect, that the Prospect Archives will prove a rich and lasting resource.

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