

**THE END OF EDUCATION**  
**A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene**  
**Delivered at Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**March 16, 2003**

**Reading**

An old man's thought of school,  
An old man gathering youthful memories and blooms that youth itself cannot.

Now only do I know you,  
O fair auroral skies—O morning dew upon the grass!

And these I see, these sparkling eyes,  
These stores of mystic meaning, these young lives,  
Building, equipping like a fleet of ships, immortal ships,  
Soon to sail out over the measureless seas,  
On the soul's voyage.

Only a lot of boys and girls?  
Only the tiresome spelling, writing, ciphering classes?  
Only a public school?

Ah more, infinitely more;  
(As George Fox rais's his warning cry, "Is it this pile of brick and mortar, these

dead floors, windows, rails, you call the church?  
Why this is not the church at all—the church is living, ever living souls.")

And you America,  
Cast you the real reckoning for your present?  
The lights and shadows of your future, good or evil?  
To girlhood, boyhood look, the teacher and the school.

("An Old Man's Thought of School: For the Inauguration of a Public School, Camden, New Jersey,  
1874," Walt Whitman)

**Sermon**

My elementary school education did a pretty good job of preparing me to be a reasonably literate, humane, curious, respectful and responsible human being. It even contributed to the sense of wonder that undergirds my spiritual being.

From the end of the first grade, through the eighth, I was schooled at Pentz School, a "one-room schoolhouse." A little white building with a bell tower, it sat on a patch of ground in the countryside of Butte County, California, in the Sierra foothills. The playgrounds—two of them, one called the "little ones' playground" and the other the "big ones"—were rock and dirt (I still have weird bumpy things in my knees from many a fall), and our baseball diamond wound its wiggly way through the tarweed and stickers.

Inside was our "one room," with movable desks and a couple of short tables for the "little ones." A cloakroom opened off one end, a tiny kitchen off the other. A United States map hung before my eyes for seven and a half of my formative years. (To this day, I know that those low-altitude things in the eastern US are "old, worn-down mountains," while ours are "young, rugged mountains.")

Our school was taught by Alma Hesbol, a formidable Norwegian maiden lady: buxom, stout, corseted. Miss Hesbol was a brilliant teacher, coordinating eight grades of students—about twenty of us—with wildly varying abilities. She trundled great piles of books back and forth between the County Library and our school at least weekly.

We had social studies every morning, taking one country a year, everyone expected to give a report or two a week on some aspect. We had Dick and Jane and we had arithmetic books, studied on our own and reported to Miss Hesbol. Older kids tutored the younger ones. (And we from education-valuing households were expected to help the numerous Ramey kids, our resident “Okies.”)

We studied science from our grade’s science texts, and were expected to give regular reports. But we got to do real stuff, too, contributing to what Walt Whitman termed the “stores of mystic meaning”. I will never, as long as I live, forget that green caterpillar wrapping itself up in something that turned out to be shiny green with gold spots, about the prettiest little jewel I had ever seen. I don’t think I actually believed it could go on and do what the books said it would, but—lo, and behold!—one day, a shaky, damp Monarch butterfly broke out of that cocoon, limbered up its beautiful wings as they dried, gathered strength, and flew away into the afternoon.

We did art projects in conjunction with social studies and science. We got to memorize poetry on Fridays (I don’t think everybody said “got to…”). We sang. County Extension people came out and taught us games and songs. (I still remember my delight at learning the Hokey Pokey from a football-player-sized young man just out of college.) Everybody, twice a year—Christmas and graduation—participated in a play given for the whole community.

I am idealizing the Pentz School, and there were drawbacks.

But I emerged with an internalized idea of what education was about, what the “end”—purpose—of education is. I didn’t know it, but my idea of the kind of person who would result from education is the kind of person who cherishes Unitarian Universalist values.

Education, I knew, was about inquiring, finding out things, working on your own to learn lots of things—and knowing that every once in awhile, some miraculous process or astounding fact or sudden idea would practically make you fall off your chair. It was about taking what you had learned and telling others so that they, too, could understand. It was about responsibility—boy, was it about responsibility—to do what you are supposed to, to contribute to the community, to help those less fortunate (accompanied, alas, by a superiority I have had to try to unlearn).

And I learned a lot about human beings and about the way we are, a great asset in my “soul’s journey.”  
(Whitman)

There were all those Children From Other Lands—and stirring poetry about brave people like Paul Revere, dependable ordinary people like the village blacksmith, emotions that moved me close to inarticulate tears:

I shot an arrow into the air,  
It fell to earth, I knew not where;  
For, so swiftly it flew, the sight  
Could not follow it in its flight.

I breathed a song into the air,  
It fell to earth I knew not where;  
For who has sight so keen and strong,  
That it can follow the flight of song?

Long, long afterward, in an oak  
I found the arrow, still unbroke;  
And the song, from beginning to end,  
I found again in the heart of a friend.

(Longfellow, 387)

We listened to “Man Without a Country” on an old record, and I wept for that poor, poor benighted soul, cutting himself off from dear connections, because of his temper, his hasty words, his ill-considered pride. His human failings.

I knew that a teacher was a special person. A person you might get pretty mad at, sometimes, but someone whose wisdom and dedication had earned high respect. I always knew I would be a teacher, and sure enough, I was—I taught high school drama and English for twenty-one years.

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I am sorry to say that my vision of education has not been realized in our country. Let us take my innocent notion that people who teach kids are really important and deserve a lot of respect. After all, they are preparing future citizens to be thoughtful, discerning, responsible, respectful and filled with wonder—generous-spirited because these students understand the human condition, flexible because they know humans experiment and make mistakes and succeed and keep doing things differently. Teachers are doing about the most important thing that needs to be done in a free country.

We do not respect teachers. Having spent twenty-one years as a public school teacher and fifteen as a Unitarian Universalist minister, I can tell you that teachers are not held in high regard. (Not even as high as UU ministers....)

We are cuckoo about standardized testing. Increasingly, teachers must teach to what is essentially a lowest common denominator—skills and knowledge that can be measured by multiple choice questions. Teachers have to be scurrying around making sure the kids know the *definition* of a metaphor, how it differs from a simile, what are other “figures of speech” and how do you define them? How can they find time to have a discussion that does justice to the “all the world’s a stage” soliloquy? Or even, in elementary school, to give the kids time and space to think about what it means when you find your song in the heart of a friend? If social studies means knowing the dates of certain events, the names of presidents, the capitals of countries, how can teachers help kids understand and value what it means to be a responsible citizen in a republic? How can they take the considerable time needed to reflect upon how and why a particular history-making event or invention or idea happened, what human nobility or wickedness went into it? If technology involves only knowing how to use what’s now available, how will we educate children into the habits of examination, flexibility and good choosing that are so necessary in the face of constant change? If science is flora and fauna and atomic tables only, how will our students learn the awe that comes from trying to grasp quantum particles and the impossible hugeness of a starry, starry night?

I hope these questions will be addressed by the United States citizenry at some point. I hope these discussions will be led by Unitarian Universalists who are as willing to be radical as was our forefather Horace Mann, in the mid-1800s, when he led the hotly-opposed movement to establish public schools for all children.

Right now, we have even more basic problems in our state, problems that feel like they involve not just the “end” (purpose) of education, but the “end,” as in “termination.” (A distinction taken from Neil Postman’s book, *The End of Education*, from which I stole this sermon’s title.) We cannot lead the charge toward humane, human education until we have dealt with the forces that fundamentally disrespect the sacred process of education—these forces being primarily the majority of our state’s legislators, who appear hell-bent on creating a wizened, impoverished, rote-learning school system, taught by horribly-paid androids, who do what they are told. The majority of Idaho legislators do not want to take responsibility for the physical conditions of schools, even when they are dangerous. Walt Whitman rightly pointed out that the heart of a school (or church) is not the buildings, but I suspect even old Walt knew that one can’t conduct genuine education (or religion) in surroundings that stifle and squish and rain drear upon occupants.

A majority of Idaho legislators seem to want censorship in libraries and classrooms, for all children. They are aiming big guns at one of the few influential bargaining agents in the state, the Idaho Education Association—the only possible “end” of proposing such legislation would be to silence what voice teachers do have.

I could go on. I really hate the bleak picture I am painting, when I know what wonders can be wrought by education.

So, where’s the hope?

The most important hope in this immediate set of Idaho crises lies in outraged and informed citizenry making its opinions known, not just once, but over and over and over. (The anti-education bills appear over and over and

over.) Do you know your legislators? Do you check in regularly with organizations like United Vision For Idaho, to see what devilry is afoot and whom to contact? Our social action chair, Besse La Budde, will be glad to chat with you. As will our Board chair, Roger Sherman, who works for UVI. As will teacher Deborah Smith, who actually goes down there and dukes it out with legislators.

Beyond untiring commitment to monitoring our elected officials, we can look at some of the successes that happen because there are still dedicated teachers out there, teachers whose spirits are still alive and well. Teachers helping their students become humane and generous and responsible and creative. We have many in our congregation, and I honor them with all my heart. Being a UU minister is pretty stressful—but it's not as hard as being a teacher. I know.

Finally, let us look to Unitarian Universalist religious educational principles to guide us as we try to save the vision of the common school, cradle of the literate, open-minded, committed citizen. Look at young people like Lina Chambers, who, since she was three, has been reciting every week (her family is one of those exemplars, people who just show up every week with their kids, regardless of the subject): “This is the church of the loving heart, this is the church of the open mind...” She has had teachers and curricula that encouraged her to appreciate diversity; to think for herself; to act with courage; to work through inter-personal difficulties in the service of the greater good, to express herself artistically, to see the world with wonder. She has participated with energy in those “soul-searching discussions and self analysis” found in the Coming of Age program. She is a fine young woman. “Everybody knows my name,” she said. And a lot of us love her.

Lina—the other Coming of Age students you will hear from later this year—the younger kids with their lively commentary—our creative and funny high school young people, who don't have room to meet in our building on Sunday morning, so who have to go to people's garages, coffee shops and bowling alleys: all these are “products” of the humane and religious education we provide kids who come regularly. Without the explicitly religious, the public schools could be doing the same. They, too, could be “building...immortal ships/Soon to sail out over the measureless seas/On the soul's voyage.” Whitman understood.

And you America,  
Cast you the real reckoning for your present?  
The lights and shadows of your future, good or evil?  
To girlhood, boyhood look, the teacher and the school.

### **Sources consulted**

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