



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

So What Do You Know?

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I went to Miles Standish elementary school in Minneapolis, MN from kindergarten through sixth grade, and it is perhaps a curiosity that I live just down the block from Longfellow Elementary School in Pasadena – Standish having become a part of American lore through Longfellow's ballad 'The Courtship of Miles Standish.' Longfellow is, of course, best known for his poems *The Ride of Paul Revere* and *The Song of Hiawatha*

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.
Dark behind it rose the forest,
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,
Rose the firs with cones upon them;
Bright before it beat the water,
Beat the clear and sunny water,
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water.

The poem is about Hiawatha, the hero, and his love, Minnehaha – a wonderful name and a favorite place of mine to explore in Minneapolis – Minnehaha Falls and Park. I played at Lake Hiawatha. I think we learned the beginning of the poem in school.

Miles Standish came over on the Mayflower and was hired by the colony as their military adviser. He held this position for some time and, apparently, was easily provoked into action – starting at least two battles – actually massacres - against the indigenous Americans in Massachusetts. He liked pre-emptive strikes.

I liked my school. It was a neighborhood school – no busing then. My sister, two years younger than me, had cerebral palsy and I pulled her to school in a wagon or on a sled in winter. I don't think school was ever called because of snow. My kindergarten teacher was Miss LePrey – she wore all black all the time, and made us eat tomato soup one day in class. I had never had anything so vile.

We played pull-away on the schoolyard, and baseball when we could, or on the merry go round or swings. From time to time, we were led down into the basement with its huge heating pipes covered in what looked like gauze, and was surely asbestos, to practice what to do when the Russians came over the top with their bombers and bombs – Minnesota would be the first hit we believed.

We sat in desks in rows and were mostly well behaved. We practiced penmanship and began diagramming sentences. We had science and arithmetic and civics class. We read, first of all, Dick and Jane, and I have absolutely no memory of what we read later. I went from soprano to baritone in the choir. Looking back, it seems so innocent.

I finished my schooling with a PhD from the University of Iowa in 1978. In High School I took college physics and learned Calculus; we read Shakespeare and Melville and Virginia Woolf, Richard Wright and Jane Austen. I read *Catch 22* in high school and Kurt Vonnegut in an honors class. I learned more civics and was told, in many direct and indirect ways, that it was my lot to lead the world – a white male protestant who did well in school and was a good athlete.

I went to a private university – Lawrence University in Appleton WI, but otherwise am a product of public schooling. Our girls went to public schools – first here in California, in Orange County, then in Fairfax County Virginia. One went to Oberlin College and the other to UC Santa Cruz. Except for the brief time in Orange County elementary schools, their education has been excellent.

Of course, they had all the advantages. Both Kathe and I have advanced degrees; we encouraged both girls in their learning; we talked a lot at nightly dinners about all kinds of things. We read a lot. We were friends with other families that were stable and interested in learning. They met people in the sciences and humanities, in business and in the arts. Kathe was PTA president; we went to every parent teacher conference.

Thomas Jefferson thought that a well-educated citizenry was the recipe for a healthy nation. Horace Mann spearheaded the drive to make education public and for everyone, and believed that the purpose of education was to produce better people. His words at commencement at Antioch College are repeated there each year: be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.

Part of the job of public education, any education, is to separate fact from fantasy – to teach us a true picture of the world. Like knowing that Miles Standish massacred native Americans, like celebrating October 11 not so much as Columbus Day but as Native American day to remind us of how our European ancestors decimated the native population when they arrived, to remind us that our history is stained with the blood of innocents and we have used power over others often. Like teaching that this was not founded as a Christian nation or that evolution is just a theory.

Without education, how can we know who we are?

But now? What about education in the US? Just recently, Gov. Rick Scott of Florida implied that the liberal arts were not worth funding, suggesting that public education was about training people for the work force.

A good friend of mine from college earned a PhD in economics and got a job teaching at Carleton College – it is among the nation's best schools. He told me – this was in the early 80s – that when he started history and English were the two most popular majors. Within five years, economics had become the most popular. Not because of him, he said, but because more students were thinking of going into business and their career opportunities than about learning what they might most love.

Education as training for corporations – is that right? Are we a nation or an economy?

We all know of the crisis in education in California and the devastating effect Prop 13 has had on schools. We all know that there is an all out assault on public education going on in our country. Teachers are vilified, accusations of 'fraud and abuse' [boy if there ever was a phrase that was a mirror of itself it is 'fraud and abuse'] are rampant without much justification; funding is cut and cut and cut. And we get dumber and dumber as a nation.

The bottom line is that this country doesn't really care much about children, especially poor children. The truth is that this country doesn't really care much about the poor at all, or the marginalized.

Now I want to be clear – this sermon is not about private vs. public education, not about Pasadena versus La Canada, or Poly vs. Sequoia, or Waldorf vs. Montessori. I have lots of conversations with parents, teachers, volunteers, and students here about the agonizing decisions they have made about education, and I am not second-guessing any choice anyone had made or might make.

But something is afoot and it strikes to the heart of who we have been as a faith movement since our early days in the country.

UUs have always claimed that religious, or spiritual truth is found through the use of reason, not revelation, and that, somehow, what is true can be publicly known rather than privately justified. This is the great weakness of Protestantism, and the glaring fault of evangelical religion, or of fundamentalism - the notion that truth is self-justified, as if because you believe something it is therefore true for all. In short, we believe

that we should think about what we claim is true, and that the way to truth is through the use of reason. As that great Unitarian theologian Jack Webb used to say 'Just the facts, Ma'am, just the facts.'

Secondly, we have claimed that it matters what we know and that we become best when we are most informed. Ignorance is not a virtue in our faith. Our sexuality program for our children – OWL – is an example and is phenomenally good. We have claimed that spiritual truth is not limited to one tradition – the spiritual truth is universal; it is a part of the human search for meaning and that Christians or Hindus or Muslims have no greater claim on the truth than any other tradition.

I became a Unitarian Universalist largely because I could not live with a tradition – the Christianity of my youth – that claimed it only was true – much like the Southern Baptist minister in Rick Perry's camp pronouncing that Mormonism and Hinduism and Buddhism and Islam – and I am sure he would add Unitarian Universalism – are false religions. Truth hath no confines we have said instead. It is not that Christianity is false, just that it is no more nor less true than other religions. There is some truth in all.

Let me be clear – the current attack on public education is like the attack 40 years ago on the civil rights movement, or on the women's movement. It is like the attack on immigrants and on Planned Parenthood and on the EPA. It is like the incredible incarceration rate of men of color. It is like the punitive justice system so many seem to want. It is an attack on the poor and the different, on the marginalized; it is an attack on people of color. Income inequality has grown by an astonishing rate in the US; we are behind most countries like us in education and in health care. Infant mortality is growing; the number of people without adequate health care is rising.

It is an attack by those who have against those who don't, of the powerful against the weak. Go 'Occupy Wall Street!'

It goes on and on and on. An aside, but not really an aside - I have to say that the recent vote by the US House of Representatives has reached a new low – the vote to allow hospitals to deny emergency treatment to a woman if an abortion is what would save her life. The House has apparently decided that a fetus is more important than a living person, that an idea matters more than a human being. This is appalling to the extreme.

It is the wealthy trying to hold on to what they have and not share; it is men trying to hold on to power; it is whites trying to hold on to privilege; it is the selfishness of our culture; it is the consequence of 30 years of political leadership focused on individual and corporate gain. It is the narcissism of who we have become. Exceptionalism, my eye. What happened to humility? And compassion and community?

Walk out the doors here, and turn left down Orange Grove and come to Lincoln Ave. Walk through the neighborhoods there. Walk up Lincoln Ave. Check out the schools in the Neighborhoods. Not a lot of luxury there.

What can we do? We have worked, through our participation in Big Saturday, to rehab the physical appearance of several schools; we have members reading to elementary school kids in our *Everyone a Reader* program. We do some things. Can we do more?

In two weeks our offering will go to 'Invest in PUSD Kids' – more information that day.

All well and good, but what is at the religious heart of this?

Think about the labyrinth out in our memorial courtyard for a minute. It is beautiful and we'll have a dedication at 1:00 on Nov 13th.

The labyrinth is there, in part, in response to the survey of a couple of years ago asking for more opportunities for spiritual growth. I led a retreat this Fall in Santa Barbara; we have a class going now on spiritual practices. I get emails regularly asking for spiritual guidance. I sit for 25 minutes nearly every day and write a daily prayer. I practice saying a gratitude before I go to sleep; we say a table grace at our home. I walk our dog as regularly as I can and no longer take a phone or music with me – I try to see the world around me. I have urged people to stop listening to Morning Edition and instead start the day gently and without irritation.

All this interest in spiritual practice is good. But when you walk the labyrinth, you don't stop in the middle – that is not the end of it. You walk back out and into the world.

What good is all this stuff we do here – worship, listening to music, meditating, praying, doing yoga – if we don't then take it back out into the world? What good are we as a people if we don't educate our children well – treat them with worth and dignity? What are they supposed to take back into the world when they hear how their education is talked about and how it is treated? What are children supposed to think they are worth when they listen to the national conversation about public education? What?

One last thought – I am reading a terrific book about Buddhism call 'An End to Suffering' by Pankaj Mishra, and in it he claims, rightly so, that the Buddha, and Buddhism is not so concerned with getting rid of sin – the western religious model, as getting rid of suffering. This seems so healthy and right to me – it seems so Unitarian Universalist to me.

Apply this to our schools – the suffering there is significant, and the sins are so minor.

Bless our schools!

Readings:

'Acting'

Suzanne Cleary

'Rain'

Naomi Shihab Nye