

2009.09.20 The War for Children's Minds

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In less than forty-eight hours, the Northern half of our earth home will tilt into its autumnal equinox. Most of the season's blackberries have ripened and been gathered from thorny vines. Here and there, a few colour embossed leaves announce the great, imminent turning of hue of tree and forest from summer to fall. On several recent mornings, I've retraced my steps on the front porch stairs to don a jacket against the chill. At 8:30 am, across the city, buzzers and bells rattle the stillness. Summer's ended; autumn's here; our children and youth have returned to the labours, joys, routines, and adventures of schooling.

This morning, I want to invite you to step with me into the landscape of education where, whether we are cognizant or not, I believe a crucial battle for the minds, hearts and future of our young people and our society is being waged. I want to talk about education primarily in this Province and then close with an appeal on behalf of, for want of a better term, *liberal* education embodied by the ideals of freedom and autonomy of the individual, and by the development of a child's capacity for critical, creative, independent, rational thought and moral behaviour. .

So first, let's focus on some distinctive features of primary and secondary education in this Province. In 1977, British Columbia "*embarked on an educational policy virtually unique in North America.*" (Jean Barman, "Deprivatizing Private Education," *Canadian Journal of Education*, 16:1, 1991. Hereafter, Barman.) In the mid 70s, well over 95% of children attended local, non-denominational public schools. Before this, private schools, religious and secular, scattered across the Province, were unregulated, received no public funding, and struggling financially to survive. In 1977 everything changed, and BC's unique experiment in publicly funding and regulating a private educational system in parallel with public schools was launched.

What happened? In a word, the turbulence of the Sixties swept through even our remote Province. Changing life styles, experimentation in public school curriculum, banning the recitation of the Lord's Prayer in public schools, the exodus of priests and nuns from the teaching orders of the Catholic Church, the rise of continent-wide, militant Christian fundamentalism, the official installment of multiculturalism as Canadian policy—all this, and more, contributed to mashing together heretofore disparate groups in this Province: Catholic, Evangelical, Jewish, and elite British model private schools and others, to clamour for their "rights" to a distinctive, separate educational system for their children—a system of private, independent schools publicly recognized, publicly protected, and publicly funded.

In 1966, the BC Federation of Independent Schools Association (FISA) launched a decade-long, intense campaign to secure recognition and funding for their schools. That campaign, which achieved its objectives between 1977 and 1989, featured effective grassroots mobilization, a well-financed public relations campaign, and non-stop political lobbying. In exchange for recognition and funding, FISA schools made a commitment to school inspection, the implementation of BC core curriculum, adequate facilities, and "*a promise not to promote*

racial or religious intolerance or social change through violent means.” (Barman; see also “The FISA Story: Meeting a Challenge,” www.fisabc.ca, and J. Steffenhagen, “Faith Based Schools,” *Vancouver Sun*, Sep. 22, 2007. Hereafter VS.) In return, the Province observes the right of qualifying schools to “promote their own religious, cultural, philosophical or pedagogical views in the classroom” and to “supplement the (BC) curriculum as they see fit.” (vs) As well, by virtue of incremental amendments culminating twenty years ago this month in the BC School Act, the maximum grant to an independent school rose from 10% in 1977, to 50% the per pupil grant to a public school. That figure, however, is misleading. According to the Society of Christian Schools in BC, combined Provincial grants and Federal tax credits can cover “*exactly two-thirds of the total operating expenses of all*” *qualifying Christian and other independent schools in the Province.* (see “Stewardship and Government Funding,” *The Link*, Vol. 3, no. 4, May 2008)

Currently, close to 11%, that’s roughly 70,000, of BC’s children are enrolled in 360 publicly funded private schools ranging from the Bountiful’s polygamous Mormon enclave, to Langley fundamentalist Christians, from Surrey Khalsa to Vancouver Talmud Torah and West Vancouver Montessori and Waldorf schools. The diversity is remarkable. Enrollment in our private, parallel school system is growing by 2% a year, with some urban districts clocking in double that percentage, while public school enrollment declines. Private schools are busy with construction and funding, while public districts have closed more than 150 schools in the past seven years. (see VS and “Overview of Independent Schools in British Columbia,” BC Ministry of Education, January 29, 2007)

I apologize for all these details, but do we really know the lay of the land?

I also don’t want to be misunderstood. *Canada is not a melting pot*; you’ve told me that time and again; I get it, mostly. Our *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* asserts that we are, constitutionally, a multicultural nation (section 27). It prohibits discrimination based on religion (Section 15). It recognizes freedom of religion within our society; it protects belief, expression, teaching and dissemination without fear of hindrance or reprisal (Section 2). And finally, as signatory to international covenants on human, civil, and political rights Canada promises “*to undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents...to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions,*” and that parents “*have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.*” (see relevant articles in the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.)

These constitutional provisions and international covenants recognize the preeminence and authority of unconstrained conscience, expression and belief. So do we. They recognize the priority, the inestimable worth, of the privacy and intimacy of family life and relations. So do we; even if we peaceably, pointedly disagree on matters of political, civil and religious beliefs, ideas and practices. As well, our laws, our international covenants are ringing endorsements of the value we believe occurs in the blooming diversity of our society, even as we do in this congregation, believing that it promotes the well-being of our nation as well as that of our congregation.

But it’s here, precisely, that a significant problem arises. Our congregation has tried to create a “big tent” sufficiently capacious enough to entertain, welcome, and celebrate a wide and deeply diverse aggregation of individuals and families; as well as their diverse beliefs, life ways, and practices. Our commitment to the common good of the congregation is expressed in part by

our commitment to an on-going confrontation and exposure to difference, to the stranger, the Other. That commitment is a value we share; that value, along with others, convokes and gathers us here on our audacious human journey together. Together; a diverse community together. I wish we could be even more welcoming of difference; I deeply long for it.

However, I have read the history and philosophy driving *the predominant actors* (who happen to be evangelical and fundamentalist Christians) of the private school movement in our Province and across this country; this is precisely what they fear and abhor: and that is the contagion of diversity. They are motivated by the fear that they will lose their children to corrosive, alien, noxious beliefs, modes of reasoning, and communities (like ours), and trafficking in the rhetoric of multiculturalism and human rights, they have turned to the state to fund the creation of a parallel society; to create separate enclaves of ethnicity, language, class, and belief removed from the taint of a fallen, nihilistic, perverse and threatening world. This is not education to the common good of a multicultural Canada. This is a recipe for fragmentation, mistrust, and misapprehension; of intolerance and ignorance of people unlike themselves: people of other classes, races, beliefs, and cultures.

I'm going to cite two sources so that you won't think that I've totally gone over the bend on this. Bill DeJager, director of Curriculum and Instruction for the Society of Christian Schools BC, which is a major player in the private school movement in our Province, wrote this in the Society's May 2008 newsletter (*The Link*).

“Contrary to the prevailing assumption of Western culture, knowledge is the fruit of God's truth, with its roots of Scripture, the created universe and the person of Jesus Christ....Christian parents who partner with the secular public school need to be well aware of the underlying disparity between their basic assumptions of life and those of each teacher with whom their child comes in contact. Their child will be exposed to...schools and teachers [that] share common values: an unspoken faith in rationality, the growing goodness of human nature and the autonomy of persons.”

I find the haunted fear of infection and the disdain for so called Western culture and its values in this statement both poignant and disturbing. This man could be my neighbour; but we live a world and centuries apart. Is that what multiculturalism means *for real*?

Second quote: six years ago our current Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, expressed the following sentiments at a meeting in Toronto:

The real enemy is...the social agenda of the modern Left...[with] its system of moral relativism, moral neutrality, and more equivalency....The modern left has moved beyond old socialistic morality...to something much darker—the rejection of any tradition or convention of morality...with deep resentments, even hatreds of the norms of free and democratic western civilization....It is a rebellion against all forms of social norm and moral tradition in every aspect of life...Social values are increasingly the really big issues...and Conservatives have to give much higher place to confronting threats posed by modern liberals to these building blocks of our society....We may lose...old...Red Tories like the David Orchards and Joe Clarks. This is not bad...A new approach can draw in new...voters from key ethnic and immigrant communities

[who] will be attracted to a party with strong traditional views on values and family. (Stephen Harper, “Rediscovering the Right Agenda,” Report, June 2003. From remarks made to the Civitas meeting in Toronto, April 25, 2003)

So there you have it; though Harper’s language and aims are more nakedly political, he trafficks in rhetoric and a world view similar to those of the BC Christian private school educator Mr. DeJager. The barbarians are at the gate; a contagion threatens; the forces of darkness are arrayed in battle against traditional families and values, against freedom, democracy, and civilization itself. Fueled by hatred and resentment, the so-called modern Left march under a fundamentally different banner of values, values which DeJager and Harper believe pose a clear and present danger to moral traditions and social norms they hold dear.

In view of the above, does it surprise anyone that well-financed and organized advocates of publicly funded private schools have recently tried to import this Province’s parallel school formula to Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador and Ontario? Voters in those Provinces prudently spurned those efforts. In the words of Paul Shaker, Simon Fraser University education dean, “public schools in the Western world are expected to promote shared societal values, but that’s not necessarily the case with independent schools.”^(vs) Farzana Hassan and Salma Siddiqui of Muslim Canadian Congress expressed their opposition to the private school drive for public funding in Ontario in these words:

“Providing more government funding to religious schools would only make matters worse. Such a plan would further ghettoize religious communities—especially the Muslim community which is already quite insular. [If this proposal were to pass] Ontario taxpayers will be subsidizing an indoctrination program [in Islamic schools] that treats Muslim girls as second class citizens....Muslim families [and their] children...will have less contact with other Canadians....Funding private religious schools will not advance diversity; [that] is best promoted in the public school system.” (Hassan and Siddiqui, “Funding religious schools is bad policy,” National Post, August 9, 2007)

And returning to Simon Fraser’s education dean, “when we promote people opting out of public schools, we’re introducing new ideologies—in force—to our children. We can do that as a society if we want to, but I don’t think we should be naïve about it. Where will they learn the values and practices that are the heart of our secular, [multicultural], democratic society?”^(vs)

Where, indeed?

I know that this is a sensitive issue, and I’m probably stepping on toes all over the place this morning. I know that parents want what they understand as only the best for their children; *I get it*, I was a parent of four school-aged children myself. As well, I affirm our rights to belief, practice and expression; and of parents’ rights to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. That said, for the life of me, as a taxpayer, a citizen of a nation and a Province dedicated to what should be upper most in our minds and those we elect to public office—which is promoting the common good, the general welfare of a thriving, diverse, multicultural country, I do not understand why I should be paying for the fragmentation of our nation into classes and profoundly separate religious and ethnic enclaves.

We enjoy extraordinary freedoms in this country. We benefit in myriad ways from its commitment to diversity. Why then, should we contribute to the widespread movement, much of it financed by conservative religious groups outside this nation, to breaking us apart and building up walls so high, so thick, that the possibilities for truly encountering, learning and being transformed by others is becoming an increasingly remote dream?

It was in my neighbourhood public schools where I first met Catholics, Jews, Protestants and atheists; kids rich and poor, white, brown and black, from Tonga, Mexico, and far away New York. It was there I also learned that we shared a common endeavour—to pursue and achieve not only our own individual goals and dreams, but that of the not-yet-achieved common good, rights, and values of a diverse, democratic nation. I knew that other kids didn't share many of my beliefs about religion, politics, and culture; we all knew that about each other. But looking back, I think we all knew that religious education and political instruction rightly took place in our synagogues, churches and homes, because our parents, religious leaders and communities took that responsibility upon themselves, and paid the steep price for it, as they should—all the more reason why they valued it as deeply as they did. They wisely chose not to turn to the state for public funding, because they knew once they walked down that road there would be precious little chance of turning back, turning back from fights over scarce resources, the erosion of public schools, and the culture wars that would ensue.

Mr. Harper and Mr. DeJager the Christian educator are not stupid people; they chose their words deliberately and with great care. Harper capitalizes on fear to gin up votes in order to secure power; he's not unique, a lot of politicians do. DeJager invokes fear in order to shore up his private religious schools and to scare parents into pulling out of the public school system. But they do it by reference to powers of darkness and the contagion of ideas contrary to their nostalgic belief that once upon a time we all knew our place and we deferred to Authority (with a capital A), to the Authority of tradition, or scripture, or to those in Authority—whether religious or secular—to whose superior wisdom, experience, power or sanctity we submissively deferred. Those were the good old days.

That's the real war for children's minds: do we make children good people by teaching them to defer to a higher authority on matters of right and wrong; or should children be taught to think independently and critically about moral and social issues in order to arrive at their own reasoned understanding of right and wrong? The war for children's minds begins with advocates of private religious education using scare tactics of contagious disease and painting adversaries with broad, scurrilous brushstrokes of relativism and nihilism, with excessive faith in rationality and human autonomy. It then proceeds by appeals to rights and multiculturalism to secure public funds to separate children into enclaves where they hope to keep the young unspotted from the taint of a messy, fallen world. And finally, within the separate world especially of religious schools, it continues by exclusion, and by invidious, negative comparison between the preeminence of Authority over and against the values of reason and autonomy. In the words of Christian educators Ken Smitherman, Donovan Graham and Bill DeJager:

“in a world staggering in...darkness where the light has been all but snuffed out” (Smitherman), *“the many programs and services we offer are intended to...teaching the Truth—God's Word revealed in scripture as well as through creation”* (Graham). *“Contrary to the*

prevailing assumptions of Western culture....[with its] unspoken faith in rationality, the growing goodness of human nature, and the autonomy of persons....[we assert] that knowledge is the fruit of God's truth, with its roots of Scripture, the created universe, and the person of Jesus Christ."
(DeJager)

We cannot turn back the clock and erase public funding of private schools in BC, or of Catholic schools in Quebec, Ontario and elsewhere. We can join with courageous Unitarians in England and Muslims in Ontario and say no to the fragmenting of their societies by those who avidly seek to extend and widen public funding to faith based schools. We could call on this Province to end a thirty-year practice where every Provincial Inspector of Independent schools has been an evangelical or fundamentalist Protestant. We should be reaching out and encouraging multi-faith and inter-faith encounters, joint endeavours and worship as much as possible in order to do our part to overcome the widening divisions between our faith and ethnic communities.

And in conclusion, let's return to where we began, with an affirmation of the journey epitomized by the words of William Ellery Channing that we read together just prior to this sermon. They are words that drive to the very heart of what we esteem as of abiding worth in our approach to education, religious and secular: "not to stamp our minds upon the young but to stir up their own; not to make them see through our eyes, but to look...with their own; not to give them just a portion of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth; not to bind them...to our own particular sect or notions, but to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may be offered to *their* decision; not to burden the memory, but quicken and strengthen the power of thought; not to impose religion...in the form of arbitrary rules, but to awaken the conscience, the moral discernment. In a word, the great end is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life." This is not relativism, not nihilism, not moral equivalency; this is pure light.

May we have some of Channing's courage and confidence in the strength of our children and the power of reason, conscience and moral discernment. We try to do that here; may we take that courage, confidence and commitment beyond these walls. So be it. Amen.