

On Public Education
A Sermon by John N. Marsh
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First Parish of Arlington, MA

Reading From Rev. Lee Barker May 2002

The Wall Street Journal article really made an impression. In the April 29th edition an article appeared that stated that Unitarian Universalist students scored the highest SAT scores of those of any other religious affiliation. I received word of this news from nearly a dozen of you. The news came via email, snail mail, and fax. Extra! Extra! UUs Test Well!

I suppose this is something to feel good about. I know I value educational and intellectual achievement as highly as the next UU. But I think it is good to keep our high SATs in perspective. Here are some things to remember.

Our SAT scores have not allowed us to unlock the ultimate mysteries of life. We still can't say for certain the reason that we live and die. We remain awestruck by the miracle of human life.

High test scores do not make for open hearts. Goodness and smartness are not one and the same. In this world evil is often carried by the most intelligent of people.

Academic achievement is not something to keep in one's sole possession. If we are called to share our bounty with others, then it is ours to work on boosting the test scores of all people so that every person has a shot at a great education.

Oh, it is nice to be recognized as one of the more academic religious movements. And it would be all the nicer to be recognized as people who shared that success with all the world ...all the world.

Lee

P.S. I must confess that my own SAT scores brought down our UU average.

Sermon

In the 1950s, '60s and '70s, many towns in both California and Massachusetts had some of the best public education systems in the world. They also had comparatively high taxes to support those systems. At some point politicians figured out they could get elected by promising to cut those taxes. The tax increases did stop, and the schools have deteriorated.

In the nine years my children were in the San Francisco public schools, we saw arts programs cut out of the school budgets, librarians cut, physical education programs cut, music programs cut, teacher's aides cut—the only thing being added was the number of children per classroom.

One afternoon one of our children came home with what he announced was good news. Mr. Jay was going to be able to stay at their school next year. His position as music teacher had been cut, but he was qualified to teach general classes and so the popular teacher would be teaching third grade.

It was some weeks after this that my wife and I decided it was time to take our children out of this school system. We moved to Rochester, New York, where neither of us had a job or family connections, but which does have some of the best public schools in the world. Four years later, our oldest child has graduated from high school and our younger two are in grades 10 and 11. We consider that move one of the best decisions we ever made.

In a few weeks I am going to talk about some of my positive experiences serving as a volunteer in the San Francisco schools. This morning I will talk about my worst experience.

A few years after school librarians were eliminated from the budget, I volunteered to go in one morning a week to help keep the school library open in my children's middle school. There was a social studies teacher who was assigned to the library five hours a week. He was also having his home renovated that year, and from some reason I never understood, he was

allowed to disappear for hours during the school day to go and meet with his building contractors. Some days I would show up and he would say, “oh, good, you are here. This is what needs to be done this morning”, and then he would disappear.

On some Wednesdays, however, I would arrive to find the library locked and the social studies teacher nowhere in the building. The office would assure me that he had checked in for the day, but no one had seen him recently.

The principal, who was slated to retire at the end of the year, could usually be found out in the halls during the classroom change time—telling students not to do whatever they were doing instead of going directly to their next class. I would accost him and ask if he knew where the social studies teacher was, or if there was something else for me to do with my volunteer time. His response was: “Well, why don’t you go to the teachers lounge and have a cup of coffee.”

The first time he suggested this I was confused. I thought he meant that if I waited for 10 or 15 minutes there would be something for me to do, but really all he meant was—“There is nothing here for you to do—please go away and don’t bother me.”

I was angry at the principal and the social studies teacher for wasting my time. However, I also came to believe that what happened was not the result of the ineptitude and laziness of one or two persons, so much as the whole system being underfunded and overburdened. I met many intelligent, dedicated teachers and administrators in San Francisco who made heroic efforts on behalf of their students.

In the words of then Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, they were trying “to create dream schools on a nightmare budget.” Many days, however, it felt like the dream was elusive and the nightmare pervasive. I also encountered teachers and administrators whose laziness and ineptitude would never be tolerated in the school district my children now attend. When things in San Francisco got to the point where we were afraid for our children’s physical safety, we knew it was time to leave.

Yesterday I attended a daylong conference on the state of public education in Massachusetts sponsored by the Stand for Children Organization. Other church members in attendance were Gwyneth Hooper and David Landskov.

After the service today, David will have a table of information about the Stand for Children organization. If you are reading this sermon and want to learn more—the web page is: www.stand.org.

Much of the energy at yesterday's conference was generated by Governor Patrick's *Readiness Project*.

Created by an Executive Order in June of 2007, the Readiness Project is a statewide initiative involving over 200 educators, business leaders, and community leaders who will lead the development of a 10-year strategic plan for the future of education in the Commonwealth. This will include consideration of some fundamental and systemic challenges that face public education in Massachusetts.

The goal of this project is to create a comprehensive, child-centered public education system that begins before kindergarten, continues through grade 12 and higher education, and extends through work force development and lifelong learning to ensure that each individual has the opportunity to achieve his or her full potential.

Patrick has challenged the people of Massachusetts to envision what it would be like to have a truly excellent, comprehensive educational system. He has created separate commissions for separate concerns. The reports of those commissions will be released later this spring and made available to all. Then the findings will be incorporated into one report and submitted to the legislature next fall.

The only way this initiative can succeed is with —public support..

Your support..

Some of the activists who gathered yesterday were bitter from their experiences. It is painful to think about the ideal, when the present falls so far short. It is painful to think about strategic advancements, when the last decades have been filled with retreats.

Massachusetts still has among the highest SAT scores in the country, but there are large gaps between students in affluent communities, who do well, and less affluent communities, who do poorly; between affluent communities where most children continue to college, and less affluent communities where many do not make it even to high school graduation.

Many of the special-education teachers in Massachusetts are not certified. Half of the students enrolled in our state colleges need remedial work in reading and writing. In some towns the school week has been cut back to four and a half days. Kindergarten programs have been eliminated. In Lexington, money from a private foundation is now used to pay the salaries of some of the teachers.

In order to raise money for education, towns in Massachusetts are now required to pass overrides. Since the economic downturn of the last few years, it has become increasingly difficult to get those overrides passed. Arlington has passed about half the overrides proposed in the last two decades. Last year there were about 150 overrides proposed throughout the state of Massachusetts; only one third of them passed.

Yesterday I spoke with Barbara Goodman, a member of the Arlington School Committee for many years, who has come to the conclusion that the greatest mistake those in municipal government make is to pit the police against the teachers against the librarians, all arguing for the same pot of money. She believes we shouldn't rely so heavily on property taxes to fund our schools, that more money must come from the state. And so she became involved in the Stand for Children organization, which works for that goal.

This morning I want to remind you that it was here in eastern Massachusetts, in a movement led largely by Unitarians (this was before the merger with the Universalists in 1961) that public education first flourished. I invite you dream, together with Governor Patrick that there may yet be a renaissance in Massachusetts. And to consider: If we do not support public education here in this congregation—who will?

Our nation's first free tax supported public school system was just down the road, in Dedham, Massachusetts. Horace Mann served on the School Committee, and in 1837 he became the head of the newly created Massachusetts Board of Education.

Horace Mann, often called the father of public education in America, also advocated temperance, abolition, hospitals for the mentally ill, and women's rights. His primary cause was education, about which he remarked that while "other reforms are remedial; education is preventative."

No other state had ever before had a Secretary of Education. There wasn't really a job description, and so Horace Mann just started doing things: holding teachers' conventions, delivering numerous lectures, carrying on an extensive correspondence, and introducing numerous reforms. He created the Massachusetts Normal School System in Lexington and Bridgewater, founded and edited *The Common School Journal* (1838), and began preparing a series of Annual Reports, which had a wide circulation and are still considered as being "among the best expositions, if, indeed, they are not the very best ones, of the practical benefits of a common school education both to the individual and to the state" (Hinsdale).

Mann's reforms included the establishment of a single school system throughout the state instead of separate local school districts. He urged separate classrooms for students at different levels of learning, and discouraged flogging and learning by rote. Most importantly, he worked for more and better-equipped school houses, more school years (until 16 years old), higher pay for teachers and a wider curriculum.

Mann's most controversial work for the Board of Education involved his advocacy of nonsectarian religious education. Mann believed children in public schools should be taught the ethical principles common across Christianity but not those doctrines about which different sects disagreed. In his own lifetime he was criticized both by those who felt his approach to be anti-Christian, and also by those who felt his "common denominator" approach to Christianity was simply a reflection of his own liberal Unitarianism.

The first state after Massachusetts to copy Mann's reforms was New York. In both states, the work to create comprehensive public schools was followed by the creation of Catholic schools where the Roman Catholic ways of being religious would be held in greater regard.

Most of Mann's educational policies stemmed from his belief in the perfectibility of humanity and society through adherence to naturally

revealed moral law. In his view, education allowed persons to discern the ethical demands of natural law, thereby creating a responsible and moral citizenry. If this sounds good to you, well, maybe it is because you share Mann's religion.

Mann was raised in the congregational church in Franklin, Massachusetts under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Nathaniel Emmons, a well-known exponent of the "New Light" Calvinism. In Mann's own words, Emmons "expounded all the doctrines of total depravity, election, and reprobation, and not only the eternity but the extremity of hell torments, unflinchingly and in their most terrible significance, while he rarely if ever descanted on the joys of heaven, and never, in my recollection upon the essential and necessary happiness of a virtuous life." Mann was by his own account a gullible student of such teachings until the age of fourteen, when his older brother by four years, Stephen, drowned. Emmons used the occasion of Stephen's funeral to preach of the hell that awaited those dying in an unconverted state. Hearing his mother's groan of pain at this pronouncement, Mann suspended his Calvinist beliefs in a Creator who could be so cruel, and commenced his life-long belief in the kindness and ethical integrity of God.

It is worth noting that while most of the prominent Unitarian reformers of that period came out of Harvard, Mann attended Brown. There he started his lifelong friendship with the other great Unitarian reformer to come out of that school--Samuel Gridley Howe—who would later, among accomplishments, become the founding director of the Perkins Institute for the Blind. Horace was a few years ahead of Samuel at Brown and acted as his tutor. Their friendship was cemented as a result of a midnight student prank. Samuel and some other students led the horse of the college President to top of the school belfry where they were intending to leave it. Horace discovered the jokers as they were completing their task.. The other students fled, but Samuel remained and Horace offered not to report the incident if Samuel returned the horse to its stable, which he did.

Most of the noted reformers in that golden age New England Unitarian reformers (1820-1860) had been educated at Harvard. I sometimes wonder if not having gone to Harvard gave Mann and Howe some of their energy and impetus to work for the education of all children, not just those whose

families could afford it. Then as now, some of those Harvard folks could be pretty parochial.

Their younger contemporary, the novelist William Dean Howells, was once the guest of honor at an annual dinner for the Boston Latin School—then, as now, a feeder for Harvard College. One of the speakers, assuming himself to be among his own kind, said that the education in the Boston area was so extraordinary that he had to say, he had never met a man who was truly educated, except that he had been educated in Boston. The next day a letter of apology was sent to Howells, who had educated himself in the backwoods of Ohio, largely by reading library books. (It is likely that Howells was the only person at the dinner that night who could read books in the European languages. Harvard did not bother to teach languages at that time. Howells had taught himself the languages, and then perfected them during the years he spent as Abraham Lincoln's ambassador to Italy during the Civil War). In his letter of reply Howells said, not to worry. Although he did not attend the Boston schools as a boy, he could say that his education had certainly progressed since he started living in the Boston area, and the evening itself, had been very educational.

After graduating from Brown University and the Litchfield Law School, Horace Mann joined the First Parish (Unitarian) Church of Dedham, Massachusetts after moving to the area in 1823 to begin practicing law.. In his very first legal case, Mann successfully represented the First Parish Church of Milton (Congregational) in their removal of their minister, who refused to participate in the custom of exchanging his pulpit with his Unitarian colleagues.

After the death of his wife, Mann moved to Boston in 1833, taking up residence at a boarding house run by the mother of the Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke. It was here that Mann began his lifelong friendship with many influential Unitarians, including Jared Sparks, Theodore Parker, William Ellery Channing (whose Federal Street Church Mann frequently attended) Elizabeth, Sophia, and Mary Peabody, whom he married in 1843.

When Horace Mann opened up the first teacher's training school, which was down the road in Lexington, its first principal was the Unitarian minister Samuel Jay May.

May had been minister in Norwell, the town and church where I grew up. He was ahead of his time in insisting on racially integrating the congregation; previously, people of color were required to sit in the balcony. May changed that, but his relationships with the leaders of the congregation became strained, and he left the ministry for a time to work for Horace Mann. He later returned to the ministry in Syracuse, New York, then the great western frontier recently opened up by the Erie Canal.

After his experience in my hometown, May felt he needed to warn the Syracuse leaders in advance of his radical views. He needn't have worried. The president of the Board of Trustees at May's new congregation, was himself a leader in the underground railroad, helping black slaves escape to freedom in Canada. With the support of the lay leaders of the Syracuse congregation, May had a great influence on city of the Syracuse—making it one of the centers of anti-slavery activity—and creating a progressive public school system—including Mays effort on behalf of many of the runaway youth who ended up doing the most menial tasks along the Erie Canal. The congregation May served in Syracuse is now named after him. Then, as now, strong lay leaders help create great ministries.

In the early 1800's the Unitarians in this area created a world. It was a world in which public education was given the highest priority. Why? Well, it was not simply so that our children could get the high SAT scores.

There are two answers.

First the words of Horace Mann, who went to Brown, not Harvard. He said:

If one class possesses all of the wealth and the education, while the residue of society is ignorant and poor, it matters not by what name the relation between them may be called, the latter in fact and in truth, will be the servile dependents and subjects of the former. But if education be equally diffused, it will draw property after it, by the strongest of all attractions; for such a thing never did happen, and never can happen, as that an intelligent and practical body of people should be permanently poor.

Knives and robbers can obtain only what was before possessed by others. But education creates or develops new treasures—treasures not before possessed or dreamed of by any one.

And from our own William Ellery Channing, who did attend Harvard (but we can forgive him for that), who comforted Horace Mann after the death of his first wife, and helped him find anew his purpose in life. Channing wrote:

The true end of education...is to unfold and direct aright our whole nature. Its office is to call forth power of every kind,...power of thought, affection, will and outward action; power to observe, to reason, to judge, to contrive; power to adopt good ends firmly, and to pursue them efficiently; power to govern ourselves, and to influence others; power to gain and to spread happiness.

Power to gain and spread happiness!

This is a message close to the heart of this community. We remind each other here that our children are more than their test scores. In a world where our children are sometimes regarded as a problem, their need for a decent education regarded as an unsolvable problem and an unwanted expense that must compete with community healthcare, we in this community remind each other that our children are miracles. I urge you to join Stand for Children, to educate yourselves about the initiatives begun by Governor Patrick, and to participate in the process he has begun. As we advocate for our children, we advocate for a better future for all of us.