

RESPONSE TO MAXINE GREENE

*Carol Wintermute*

Two days ago I heard on the radio a brief portion of a John Gardner talk in which he delivered the following quote. He said that children are our greatest source of adults. That phrase stuck in my head as I realized that it gives a jolt to the American myth that we are a family-centered society and that children are our greatest resource. Both political parties are vying for the title of protector of the family. In reality it points to the fact that we are really an adult-oriented society that uses children as an excuse to perpetuate a particular value system. But even if our motives are selfish in this vein, we should be warned that due to our increasing longevity on this planet, there is time to watch several generations of children join our ranks as adults. We should be darn concerned to see what kind of people we are creating that will affect our lives as they become participants in the decisions of the adult population.

It is in the realm of education that our children become the products of society. And it is a problem in education today because there is no clear, commonly held belief about what it is supposed to produce. Does this institution exist to equip our children for productive employment in the new technological age, or is the purpose of education to create an informed and responsible citizenry?

Like all well-meaning liberals, I opt for a public education system that aims for the protection of freedom. As Maxine Greene points out, that freedom is equivalent to an unpredictable and unfolding becoming. Specific educational goals and objectives necessarily limit such growth possibilities by defining and prescribing the outcome. To educate children and young people for the expansion and protection of freedom is a risky business because it opens the way for all kinds of developments beyond our control.

The issue of control seems central to understanding the liberal and conservative positions on education. Conservatives want local control of our educational institutions. They advocate separate but equal schooling, which is a liberal no-no. But cultural diversity is a definite in proposition for us. Yet local control, whether it is in the hands of the family unit or special interest groups does enhance the possibility for cultural retention. Catholics, Hispanics, the Muong or Native Americans can retain their cultural identity in separate schools without fear of assimilation.

Liberals find themselves in the uncomfortable position of advocating equality of educational opportunity within a public education system while trying not to have equity synonymous with sameness, mediocrity or cultural distillation. We suspect that local control for the conservatives is not motivated by the desire for cultural diversity. Local control is the means of ensuring the authority of the family unit without influence from some larger societal body.

But for liberals and Humanists who are motivated by the goal of creating responsible citizens and an enhancing life for all, equality of opportunity

is a basic premise. It requires a centralist position on the control issue. Control of public education, and it must be public, as Maxine Greene has stated, if it is to effect all the citizens, has to lie with representatives of the populace.

That is exactly what conservatives fear - a public discourse that may result in the many groups involved coming to an agreement that all their views be made available for children to consider. This agreement opens the way to relativistic thinking, critical appraisals of value systems, and the possible departure of children from their parents' indoctrination. I think that the basic fear of adults in having an educational system which may produce free-thinking children, is that, the children may make choices that don't validate our own, and leaves us feeling insecure about the paths we've followed.

Are we liberals and Humanists, unlike the conservatives, really free from this fear? Are we truly open to our children's exploration into, and the possible embrace of, other than our own Humanistic world view?

My experience as a religious education director tells me that perhaps we are as much at fault in not coming into the public arena for debate, as Maxine Greene advocates, as are the conservatives. I meet parents who are anxious for their children to openly investigate the tenets of far away Buddhism, Islam, etc. But when it comes to objectively talking about creationism, they are alarmed and insist that the only perspective for looking at this view of the world is exposure of all its false notions. I have listened to a range of positions, about teaching the Bible - everywhere from (1) ignore it, (2) teach it as literature, and (3) teach Bible criticism to help arm our children with clever arguments that will destroy its validity in the face of an attack from Christian or theistic friends. Thus we sometimes share the conservative's fear about teachers being too relativistic in situations where we would prefer to indoctrinate them with our well-taken positions.

We also face a dilemma in our view of the public school's role in the issue of providing equal but excellent education for all. We espouse firm beliefs in mainstreaming the handicapped and learning impaired, maintaining minority representation in the classroom and the right of the deprived to quality schooling. But in the particular, how do we Humanists handle the situation of our bright youngsters' complaint that they are not learning anything because the teacher is always occupied with the slower learners? We want equality but not if our children are deprived of the opportunity to reach their full potential. Do we work within the system to solve this problem, or do we remove ourselves and the kids to a private sphere where they will get a better than equal education? In my local school district I am aware of two teachers and a principal who are sending their children to private school because they will not receive the education they deserve in their own school building.

I think we need to be ready to enter the public debate fully aware of our dilemmas and inconsistencies like the reasoning people we are supposed to

be. We Humanists often avoid the public space, preferring the role of liberationist philosophers and critics, or even as credit-takers for progressive thinking and educational development. But are the philosophers really affecting public education? Is it not the conservatives who are actually running the day-to-day operations. While we reason, they are taking charge.

We are centralists, because we are aware that such things as civil rights are not produced at the grass roots level, but from the pressure on our governmental representatives to institute social justice. This is where we need to enter in and insist that the state create a relationship with the schools aiming for social responsibility.

When we say "state", we are talking of the many levels Maxine Greene mentioned - federal, state, district, municipality. Each level may be connected, but not in a direct line. There are moral and ethical questions to be dealt with at each one. Yet there is no mutual relationship between these states and the schools on any but the provisional function. The state is into funding, for example, but not into the protection function as much as it could be.

The problem lies in that the schools want autonomy to police their own system. We need to insist that the state interfere to the point of making the schools accountable for self corrections. It is a rather passive interference in that we can demand a system of checks and balances and leave the school officials to report how and what self-corrections have been made. But our job as participants in the process is not complete until we examine the school's accounts and bring our criticisms back into the public arena for further discussion.

We can ask about such matters as teacher development and career training. We can ask ourselves how to help schools create a work ethic around the teacher. We can arouse the other professions to take an active interest in supporting quality education. We can stop engaging in the futile battle of competency statistics and other rationalist enterprises and remember that education is not a system of applied scientific principles but, for me, it is an art. An art that requires the ability to envision a general outcome with the flexibility to see opportunities in the specific situations that may lead to outcomes not anticipated, but which are successful new creations. This process requires our protection. We can have excellence, equality of opportunity, and freedom in our educational system only if we enter as citizens into a relationship of state with the schools.

When we engage our governmental representative in this trilevel relationship we are modeling an awareness of the need to expand beyond self-interest, to the interest of others, to community building, to environmental responsibility and to a sense of the democratic world view that values freedom as the primary social objective.

For those of you who attended last year's annual meeting, I was asked to talk about a Humanist curriculum framework we at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis were developing. Since that time, the Unitarian/Univer-

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salist denomination has acknowledged this work by flying me to Boston headquarters to talk about cooperating on a project to install this curriculum throughout my own Midwestern district. The aim is to try it out in Humanistic Unitarian/Universalist societies as well as in more theistic settings.

The general framework is applicable to a diverse population, but the specifics are up to each participating unit. We will share the resulting courses and use them as we see fit. We were aiming to create a public space like Maxine Greene has outlined where we shared our universals and let the diversity exist in the specifics. Maxine has provided me with the rationale for doing this. And it is my and Khoren Arisian's great laugh that it is the Unitarian/Universalist Humanists who have provided a space in the denomination for discourse and cooperation in moral and ethical education. I strongly agree with Maxine Greene that Humanists must occupy the existing public spaces or create new ones.