

Twenty Years of Schoolin and They Put You on the Day Shift
April 6th, 2008

A change is going to come: perhaps *this* was my very thought as I stood on the precipice of graduating from the highly esteemed educational institution, Friendly House, my neighborhood pre-school. I remember my mother coming into my rose-carpeted room I shared with my brother, sitting with me on my bottom bunk, and offering me one of my first major life decisions to make. “Eliza,” she said, “Next year you’ll be going to a new school. You have two choices...” She told me I could either go to the nice mainstream neighborhood elementary school down the road, or I could go to MLC—the Metropolitan Learning Center—an alternative k-12 public school that had grown out of the progressive education movement and had just opened two years before, in 1968. It was the school my older siblings and most of the neighborhood kids I knew were attending, and so, with no hesitation, and

excitement in my heart, I announced: “MLC.” Thus came the change—the first change—as I moved on from the neighborhood safety of Friendly House, to the much bigger, more distant, more urban Metropolitan Learning Center—a school where letter grades weren’t given, where, aside from reading and math, children as young as myself—five at the time—could choose all their classes, and where people of all races and classes and backgrounds came from all corners of the city to learn.

And learn I did. I learned to read. I learned to keep a journal and write short stories. I learned to move comfortably in a world of mixed ages as well as classes and races. I learned to live among progressive teachers, artists, musicians, dancers, scientists, and plain old hangers out. Learning felt natural to me, whether I was throwing pottery on a wheel,

reading *King on a Swing*, or working through long division with my favorite teacher.

Understanding now MLC's own part in the movement that Myles Horton helped bring to life by founding the Highlander Folk School back in 1932, I see how MLC worked to provide, in Horton's words, "stimulating presentation of material and study of actual situations" that would enable students "to make decisions for themselves and act on the basis of enlightened judgment."

But change would come again, and I discovered that my own enlightened judgment was not quite bright enough, and that my *natural* learning was not necessarily up to *standard* learning: When my father died, and my mother transferred my brother and me to a private school with help from the social security we collected, my confidence and my creativity were confronted by my poor admission test results in both language

arts and mathematics. My brother and I not only had to attend summer school before entering this new school, we both were held back a year. Change is going to come? Yep: in the form of fourth grade—again. Perhaps I should have taken it as a bad omen when my new fourth grade class started the year by studying planets and I was assigned Uranus. But, though the adjustments took time, *in* time I also thrived at that school, which also had progressive education leanings. And, had family changes not come along *again*, I would have graduated from high school there. As it was, I ended up attending three different high schools.

College came next and then, over a period of twenty years, three different master's degrees. I guess I liked school. Still do. But looking from this vantage point, all the way back to that day in my rose-carpeted room where I, like Walt Whitman, seemed to pronounce, "Afoot and light-hearted, I

take to the open road, healthy, free, the world before me,” I sit ambivalently now with the privilege I have experienced in all the days of learning since that day—the privilege which Allan Johnson notes in *Privilege, Power, and Difference* as “a social arrangement that depends on which category we happen to be sorted into by other people and how they treat us as a result.”

Specifically, about a month ago I found myself literally sitting uneasily as I attended my first meeting of Austin Interfaith clergy people and staff organizers. I’d come to the meeting to get a glimpse of what Austin Interfaith is, and of how it works. For those of you who don’t know, Austin Interfaith is an organization that strives to break *through* categorical thinking and systems. It is, in part, and in its own words, “a multi-ethnic, multi-issue coalition of 30 religious congregations, public schools, and unions who work together

to address public issues that affect the well being of families and neighborhoods in our community.”

As I sat and listened that day, the discussion became somewhat heated when it moved into the issue of public education in Austin, and into the proposed 2008 Austin Interfaith agenda item, “Education for a Creative Economy.” Listed below that item heading were five bulleted goals, which I quote here:

- Change state and federal policy to reduce reliance on the state standardized test.
- Reduce local school districts’ reliance on drill and kill teaching methods.
- Engage business and political leaders in developing a comprehensive strategy for education and workforce...
- Develop strategies to make college more affordable for all students.
- Develop relationships with Austin Independent School District schools out of congregational organizing strategies.

At the core of the debate, as I remember it, were the issues of standardized tests and drill and kill teaching methods. While some felt that such policies and methods were damaging to the spirit and success of students, at least one person argued that his own public schooling, thirty or so years earlier, had been similar, and that he had come out just fine.

Despite my own experience in the world of education, not only as a student, but as a writer and editor in educational publishing and as a teacher as well, I found myself reluctant to jump into the conversation. What did I know, really, of public education? And how connected with public education, really, was my own congregation? I know of at least a handful of folks at Wildflower Church who teach or who have taught in the public school system. And I know of several children and youth in our congregation who do attend public schools. But it

also seems to be that an above-average proportion of our children and youth are taking different paths in their education, whether through home-schooling, Montessori schools, Waldorf schools, or other alternatives. In other words, the current educational culture of this congregation and the educational culture in which I have moved through life are, in large part, reflections of each other. In large part—not across the board, but in large part—we have had the privilege of avoiding the pains and struggles of the standardized tests and drill and kill teaching methods that policy makers demand of public school systems.

So when I read in the *Austin American-Statesman*, as I did just four days ago, the headline, “Teachers Ready to Flee Johnston,” and read in the article itself that, quote, “Of 64 teachers at Johnston [High School], 26—or about 41 percent—have requested to be assigned to other schools in the fall,” I

wonder how this congregation, myself included, feels called to respond as a religious community? Are we called at all? After all, Johnston High School is on the other side of the I-35 “tracks,” and the majority of the people who attend Wildflower live west of the highway. The racial makeup of people living in Johnston High School’s zip code, 78721, is approximately 60% African American, while Wildflower is almost entirely white. According to a 2005 survey, the average adjusted gross income of people living in the Johnston High School area is less than half that of the State average, at \$21,434. Wildflower? Well, you get the point. If we identify ourselves categorically, we have the privilege of not having to have much connection with Johnston High School at all.

But if we identify ourselves *religiously*, how might we dismantle systems of privilege and bridge that sense of disconnect? Consider our principles. Consider the inherent

worth and dignity of every person, and think of those students who may lose nearly half their teachers next fall, or perhaps the whole school itself. Consider the free and responsible search for truth and meaning and juxtapose it with the “drill and kill” method of teaching also known as direct instruction, which, according to a 2002 article in *School Reform News*, encourages teachers to “[operate] from detailed scripts, [and to]tell kids what they need to know, rather than letting them discover it for themselves.” Consider the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregation and in society at large. Is there really nothing we can or should do in response to news like that of Johnston High School and its teachers eager to flee?

Ultimately, I know that we Wildflowers will not be *the ones* who come sweeping in to rescue Albert S. Johnston High School and radically change its culture or story. We are

struggling enough, as our congregation grows, with finding ways to prevent some of our *own* leaders from experiencing the same fatigue that those beleaguered Johnston High teachers must feel. It is a serious challenge we face, and we must find strategies for supporting and sustaining our church leadership. But just as we must consciously work to bring an efficiently strategic system of democratic leadership to our own growing religious community, we must strive for the same in the larger context in which we live. To disconnect ourselves from the news of schools like Johnston High School being repeatedly ranked as “academically unacceptable” is to deny the interdependent nature of the society we live in, and to perpetuate the privilege Allan Johnson speaks of. “Just as privilege tends to open doors of opportunity,” says Johnson, “oppression tends to slam them shut.”

So what do we do? What do we do to support learning environments that have, as Highlander Folk School founder Myles Horton says, “a concept of education that is yeasty...that will multiply itself”? What do we do to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person, not only in our religious education classrooms, not only in our sanctuary, but in that world out there where, in Horton’s words, “poor, oppressed people” have never “been allowed to value their own experience ...” that world in which “they’d been told... that only experts and teachers knew what was good for them”? What do we do, in the great poet Whitman’s words, to aid children and youth of all races and classes to pronounce, “Henceforth I ask not good fortune—I myself am good-fortune..../All seems beautiful to me; I can repeat over to men and women, you have done good to me, I would do the same to you”?

Three weeks ago, when talking about war, and the Iraq War specifically, I asked you the same question: What can we do? If it feels now like I'm asking a lot of you—stop the war, reform the education system, so on and so forth—let me point out that those two issues are not so far removed from one another. As many of you know, the No Child Left Behind federal education policy includes in it a section that requires high schools to provide students' contact information to military recruiters, unless families proactively request that information to be held. Knowing that, if last year, as the April 2nd *American-Statesman* article notes, "59 percent of Johnston students passed the reading test, 51 percent passed social studies, 31 percent passed math and 27 percent passed science," who do you think is going to come knocking at those very young people's doors offering them "not just a job, but an adventure"?

War is not adventure. Nor is the poverty that is both its cause and its effect. In fact, in his autobiography *The Long Haul*, Myles Horton frames poverty as a form of violence. Conversely, he frames education—true, egalitarian education—as *nonviolence*. Keeping that in mind, recall the words of Allan Johnson that Martha read earlier. He says:

The trouble that surrounds difference is really about privilege and power—the existence of privilege and the lopsided distribution of power that keeps it going. The trouble is rooted in a legacy we all inherited, and while we’re here, it belongs to us. It isn’t our fault, but now that it’s ours, it’s up to us to decide how we’re going to deal with it before we pass it along to generations to come.

We have choices. We can perpetuate, passively or aggressively or any way in between, the violence of poverty. Or we can say out loud, “a change is going to come,” and start crossing that

bridge from privilege to beloved and just community. I believe that if we want change and believe in change, one way we can create change is by joining Austin Interfaith in its collective effort to support and sustain, among other things, “education for a creative economy.” In the coming weeks and months I hope to provide you with more information—to help educate you—about Austin Interfaith, so that we can move mindfully and strategically toward a deeper and wider commitment to our own religious values and to our surrounding community. I hope you will join me in striving toward such a goal. For, just as the individual leaders of this congregation cannot do it all alone, we as a congregation cannot change our society alone. We need allies on the journey. We need to *be* allies on the journey. So let us cry, as Walt Whitman did, as I’d like to believe I did as a five-year old sitting in my rose-carpeted room, “Forward! After the great Companions! And to belong to

them!” In moving so forward, may we all learn from, and grow in beloved community with, each other. And to that I say, Amen.