

## **Being Fully Human: The Corny Education of Souls**

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January

I invite you into the deep waters of reflection upon education. I hope that at the end of this sermon, you will be motivated to learn more about our Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington Adult Education classes.

What does it mean to educate the soul? In this morning's Poetic Provocation, Mary Oliver offers some questions we might ask. "Is the soul solid like iron? Or is it tender and breakable?" A few years ago I attended a Meadville-Lombard Mid-Winter Institute on Unitarian Universalist Adult Education. The presenters, Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School for the Ministry, and Bill Murry, then President of Meadville Lombard Seminary and former minister of this congregation, presented this question: "How can we enable our congregations to be places where people overcome the negative effects of the dominant culture in order to be more fully human?" Rebecca and Bill spoke about the need for each of us to attend to the divine seed within, and through education allow for the unfolding of the human soul.

Rebecca Parker defined education as "humanization in the context of dehumanizing forces, within an abiding presence of a healing, sustaining and transforming grace" (grace defined simply as "that thing which will not allow us to be smooshed"...inner strength, human spirit, will, divine presence within, transcendent presence). Parker went on to say that through education we cooperate with this revolutionary grace in the restoration of the soul.

She concluded with this important distinguishing comment: "Enrichment and self-improvement education will not heal our loss of soul, which is the loss of our connection with the public world."

In other words, we may tend to remove ourselves from the public world, become numb, when the real world becomes too painful and overwhelming as a result of dehumanizing forces such as religious intolerance, corporate greed, war, sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, or environmental injustice. We find ourselves knowing, yet paradoxically not wanting to know.

So we remove ourselves, and consequently our souls, as we bump into Oliver's questions. "Is the soul solid like iron? Or it is tender and breakable like the wings of a moth in the beak of an owl?"

Education. Quite a topic as we sit here on this snowy January morning, on the edge of a 1,860 acre college campus just down the street. Last summer, my 15 year old niece Saoirse and I took a tour of the Indiana University campus. She had come to stay with my partner and me for 10 days. She was different than the 13 year old I had known when we lived five minutes from her (and my brother's family) in Madison, WI. Instead of hopping in the car and immediately turning the radio to her preferred station and decibel level, she asked me what I wanted to listen to; and if I gave her the choice, she replied, "Is this too loud?" Instead of begging to go to McDonald's, she wanted to help me cook at home, exploring some vegetarian alternatives. Instead of constantly answering my probing questions with her favorite response, "maybe," she now paused, and offered a definitive "yes" or "no" on most occasions, saving the "maybe" for more effectively appropriate times. And she expressed interest in the possibility of someday attending IUB, as she calls it—our Indiana University campus here in Bloomington. Well, within a short amount of time after hearing that declaration, her Aunt Mary Ann arranged for a campus tour.

It was a warm, humid July day. We started at the Indiana limestone Sample Gates. I explained to Saoirse that the gates were completed when I was still in Law School, 1987. We explored the student building, then walked through the

bowling sounds and popcorn smells of the Indiana Memorial Union, later sat by the sculpture of Herman B. Wells, peeked into Beck Chapel with its available Torah, Koran and Bible, splashed at Showalter Fountain. (I told her about jumping in the fountain with my friend Doug the night we finished our last law school final.) We then spent a good deal of time at the Neal-Marshall Black Cultural Center. Saoirse and I both appreciate this center, which was dedicated in 2001 and named after Indiana University's first African American male and female graduates.

Eventually we wound around buildings at Jordan, 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, and then down Indiana. We stopped for lunch in what is now called The Gables that houses the Roly Poly eatery.

As we sat across from each other in this well lit, lightly crowded, well-kept place, I began to ponder the purpose of education and its value to my niece. Would this institution help her to become more fully human?

I found myself haunted by a lecture I had heard from the Quaker thinker and education advocate, Parker Palmer, a few years ago. As I looked at my niece with concern, suddenly everything went dark. My nostrils were abruptly filled with the strong smell of old books and vanilla flavoring. The light was dim. The booths were marked up and the walls scratched. I looked outside; it was night-time. We were alone except for one lone fellow in a long coat and gentlemen's hat sitting at a piano.

"What's going on?" I asked Saoirse. She shrugged her shoulders, and then turned toward the guy at the piano, who now was heading out the door.

"But I bet he may have some answers for us. C'mon let's follow him," she said.

We scrambled out the door and saw his silhouette down the street. He was leaning against a tree. Everything looked different. As we ran toward him, I turned back to look at “The Gables” and saw instead the sign, “The Book Nook.”

“Oh no.” I grabbed Saoirse’s arm.

“What’s up Aunt Mary Ann?” she asked.

“Oh no, there’s this phenomenon that sometimes happens to UU Ministers when we are writing a sermon. We enter into this thing called the Space Time Continuum. There’s no linear time. It’s a place we receive education about something for a sermon, usually imparted by someone from the past or future.”

I looked around down the empty night streets, the old models of a few parked cars, the clock tower, the trees where the Sample Gates usually stood.

“And by the looks of this place, I bet we are in the 1920’s or 1930’s, and that guy leaning against the tree right there, is Hoagy Carmichael.”

Hoagy turned toward us, tipped back his hat, and offered a Hoosier draw—  
“At your service kid.”

I pulled Saoirse aside and said, “This also means that we are in a time before any Civil Rights Actions, Women’s Movement, or GLBT Awareness.” I looked down the shadowy streets. “I’m not sure if we are safe here.”

“It’s OK Aunt Mary Ann, Hoagy here is the only person we are going to run into,” Saoirse assured me.

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“I just know...trust me,” she replied; then asked, “By the way, who’s Hoagy Carmichael?”

“Oh, he’s a famous Indiana musician and composer. He spent a good portion of his life here in Bloomington. He’s even buried here. He was born in 1899 and died in 1981. He wrote a lot of well-known songs. Y’know like that “Heart and

Soul” song you and Megan play on the piano. His most famous song was ‘Stardust.’”

“Written on a night like tonight,” Hoagy reflected as he looked up at the stars. “But tell me kid, what’s bothering you? Why are we all here this evening?”

I pulled Saoirse aside again. “What’s bothering me right now is my feminist sensibilities; he keeps calling me ‘kid.’ I am a grown 45 year old woman. Don’t you think I should say something to him?!”

“Chill, Aunt Mary Ann; technically he’s over 100 years old. You are a kid to him. Just tell him what’s bothering you....”

“It’s that Parker Palmer lecture isn’t it?” Hoagy said.

“Yes,” I admitted. These space-time continuum figures had no respect for linear time. They tended to know a lot more than me, which I found irksome. I pulled out my box of Tea Tree Oil Toothpicks and offered one to Hoagy, then Saoirse, and took one out myself. They each placed one in their mouth and tasted. “Smoothe,” Hoagy remarked.

“Cool,” Saoirse added.

Then Hoagy pressed me. “What is haunting you, MAM?”

“Well, in his lecture, entitled ‘The Violence of Knowledge,’ Palmer pointed out some things I found disturbing.”

“Go on,” he said, slowly rolling the toothpick in his mouth. My toothpick was already frayed at the end. I tend to chew them up when I am irritated. I started pacing and Saoirse sat down on the nearby stonewall to listen.

“Well, first, Palmer defined violence as “*any way we have of violating the integrity of another,*” so of course that includes bombs, being hit, physically hurt, but it also includes racism, sexism, labels, rendering another invisible, manipulating others toward our ends. And I agree with all of that. Then he talked about his tradition as a Quaker, and their practice to ‘honor the sacredness in every

person and also to discipline themselves to hold opposite viewpoints in tension. By patiently holding paradoxes in tension, new possibilities, not known before, can become available; it is really an enduring process of keeping an open mind and open heart, instead of moving to immediate answers or reactionary solutions.”

“And that haunts you?” Hoagy and Saoirse asked simultaneously.

“No, no, it’s just that our education system doesn’t always teach this way. There sometimes are hidden curriculums in classrooms. Like the professor I had for a *Values of Democracy* class. Basically he taught the class with this format: Listen to what I say. Sit down. Shut up. Regurgitate back. It was a mini totalitarian society. I don’t want Saoirse to be subjected to that.”

“Aunt Mary Ann.” Saoirse stood up next to Hoagy. “I can take care of myself. Trust me.”

“I trust you Saoirse; I just don’t trust our society right now. It is like our country has been turned upside down. We’ve gone to war based on lies; our protests acknowledged only with silence. And Hoagy, we’ve made progress in areas of racial justice since your time here, 1920’s and 30’s, but now racism has taken on new guises. For example, just look at the statistics of our prison system here in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century United States; right now there are more African American males between the ages of 18-25 in our prisons than on our college campuses. Something is dreadfully wrong.

“And here on this campus, we try to uphold the values of free speech; meanwhile, we’ve had a business professor with blatant homophobic hate speech on his web-site. Many of the assertions lacking academic accountability—saying gays shouldn’t be in positions of leadership, like teachers or ministers. How do we hold that tension? Free speech? Hate Speech? What does it mean to be fully human? Hoagy, what is the education of the soul?”

“Breathe?” Hoagy said simply.

“Breathe,” Saoirse added.

I spit out the splintered toothpick pieces from my mouth, and took a deep breath, then continued. “Palmer told us the story of the hidden curriculum of the German Academy during the Nazi Era, which had the notion of value free knowledge. ‘The German University was not to engage in the moral dilemmas of the society surrounding it. They created a wall that rendered society invisible. Detaching from the dehumanizing forces of the outside world. But at the University of Munich there was a small group of students and one professor, who published a newsletter protesting Nazi policy and practice. They called themselves the White Rose. I call that, “the White Rose”, an education.’

“Yet I must tell you two, in the end, all the members of The White Rose were executed. And the killers were family people, lovers of Beethoven, scholars, lawyers, theologians, artists. Some directly involved in the killing, and others complicit by virtue of their silence.

“And this story leaves me with a profound moral question. ‘What about my complicity in the violence of our times? Am I, are we, living our full potential? A life of power? How can education help us?’”

Saoirse looked me directly in the eye and replied, “By not disconnecting from the real world, Aunt Mary Ann, in all of its ugliness, injustice and all of its beauty and goodness. We must stay engaged.”

Hoagy took off his hat and placed it on her head. “You’re one cool cat,” he said.

“Saoirse, I want you to have an education that keeps you real. I think you can get that here at IUB. But you must be aware of hidden curriculum in the academy and in the world,” I warned. “On the other hand there’s so much cool stuff to learn, some good professors and researchers to learn from. Do you two have time for one more story from Parker Palmer?”

“It’s your sermon kiddo,” Hoagy remarked with a wink, and I saw Saoirse lower her head grinning. Unruffled, I continued.

“Palmer spoke about the *habit of objectification* we often slip into through educational practices. We reduce objects till they have no truth or inner mystery. Palmer shared the story of the 1983 Nobel Prize Winner Barbara McClintock who did genetic research, much of which was with Indian corn, in the 1940’s. While McClintock was a rigorous thinker who used well her intellect, logic and keen sense of observation, she also brought imagination and intuition into her work. ‘Doing real science,’ McClintock asserted, ‘you have to have a feel for the organism.’ Remarking about her corn studies, she commented, ‘to do great science, you have to lean into the kernel.’ McClintock’s biographer Evelyn Keller said this: ‘In her relation to ears of corn, Barbara McClintock practiced the highest form of love, which is intimacy that does not annihilate difference.’

“That’s the kind of education I want for you Saoirse. A place where the pursuit of truth invites you into a genuine life of inquiry, a classroom which doesn’t always want immediate answers and quick solutions, but values imagination, those vulnerable half-formed thoughts, intuitions, tentative probings...a place which invites you to unfold into your full human potential.”

Saoirse came up and patted me on the shoulder. “It’ll be there sometimes Aunt Mary Ann, and sometimes it won’t, but I will be looking for the difference because,” she said, “because every way of knowing tends to become a way of living. And, personally, I want to live fully as a human being.” She took her toothpick out of her mouth and tapped it lightly on my nose.

I saw Hoagy roll up his sleeve and look at his watch. “You’ve got a sermon to finish. And we’ve gotta go.” He removed his hat from Saoirse’s head and pulled it down back over his forehead.

“Wait, Hoagy, how do I finish the sermon!?” I quickly queried.

“You lazybones, tell them about the Adult Education classes. About education and becoming more fully human. Tell them to come up after the service and explore the classes the Adult Education Committee has put together. Tell them to stay and find out about it all!”

“And!” Saoirse added emphatically, “tell them no hidden curriculum, and remind them that enrichment and self-improvement education will not heal our loss of soul; in our classes we need to stay connected with the real world. It’s a high cause, this greater understanding of who we are and what in us is true.”

I watched Hoagy as he noticed the bright stars above, the North Star hanging low over the trees. “C’mon Saoirse,” he said, “I have a song to find.” They began walking back to the *Book Nook* together.

Thanks for helping me find my sermon, I thought to myself, as they disappeared into the starry night. And then I yelled, “Wait, I have one more question.....Saoirse, was any of this real?”

“Maybe Aunt Mary Ann,” I heard her voice say, “....maybe.”

So may it be.

Amen.

Shalom.