
Phil Smith Lecture
TRUDGE TOWARD FREEDOM: MORAL COMMITMENT AND
ETHICAL ACTION IN EDUCATION

William Ayers
University of Illinois-Chicago

In Bertolt Brecht's provocative poem, "Motto," he asks,
"In [the] dark times will there also be singing?"

His response:

"Yes, there will be singing. /About the dark times."

There's plenty of evidence of the dark times: crises everywhere, sorrow everywhere, slaughter and suffering and undeserved harm: floods and storms of Biblical proportions, wildfires in the West, oil spills and nuclear melt-downs, cholera in Haiti, police torture in Chicago—if people aren't dying unnecessarily in one place, then they're dying miserably someplace else. There's also the annoying and dangerous Tea Party triumphalism, the vicious privatization of the public space, and the dramatic failure of the Obama administration to live up to its promises of peace and openness. These are surely the dark times.

Then there's the Smithsonian's unconscionable cowardice—a prevailing characteristic in universities and cultural institutions today—collapsing in the face of a howling mob and removing David Wojnarowicz's embattled AIDS video, and bowing to anti-intellectualism and art phobia. And on a different note, there's bed bugs: Chicago has the fourth largest infestation in the country, and my friend Therese Quinn says bed bugs are a perfect metaphor for our times: the proliferation of these dark and odious insects alongside the impoverishing anti-regulatory, union-bashing, and free-marketsteering policies of the last few decades, an unmistakable sign that things are seriously not good for a whole lot of us. These bugs—unlike Asian flu or Africanized bees—are so American: they can consume three times their body weight at a single sitting. We can blame bedbugs on Reagan, Clinton, and the Bushes—those hungry insects and those hungry politicians having similar biting and draining effects.

But there's a lot of singing in these dark times, too, and let's hold that up to the light as well. Let's sing the mothers at Whittier School in Chicago seizing a field house and demanding a library for their children—those radicals!—and the mothers and families of torture victims and death row inmates in Illinois never letting go, never giving up, and winning with their courageous offspring and their intrepid advocates exoneration and at least a

half-measure of justice. There's the Immigrant Justice League kids with their T-shirts that read "Undocumented and Unafraid," and the Iraq/Afghan veterans against the wars who echo perhaps the best line from *Avatar*: "I didn't sign up for this shit."

Let's sing as well the Cochabamba and Cancun gatherings, and the seizing of global environmental leadership from the powerful elites by the marginalized and the many, and the unstoppable reframing of GLBTIQ rights—although we might pause here and note that while simple fairness demands equity, those gen/sex rebels who inspire all freedom loving people have not been fighting and sacrificing all this time and will not settle for the right to carry a gun in illegal and unjust wars, or to live exactly as Ozzie and Harriet direct—it goes deeper than that, and justice, the demand not just for access but also for equality and for recognition of human rights for everyone in our wildly queer and diverse human family, should never allow itself to be sold short.

And let's not forget to sing Wikileaks and especially Bradley Manning, the soldier locked in a military dungeon for the crime of truth-telling, being hollowed out now by torture and drugs. We might marvel, too, at the US government and the bought media falling over itself to demonize and misdirect, portraying Manning as a nut and a repressed homosexual to boot (how 1950s!) and labeling Julian Assange, Wikileaks' public face, a terrorist, enemy combatant, irresponsible saboteur, and threatening charges of espionage and high treason.

Remember the "two minutes hate" from George Orwell's *1984*—the daily period in which party members were required to stare at images of the party's enemies (notably Emmanuel Goldstein) and express their disgust in howling unison, a form of brainwashing and the utter demonization of a manufactured enemy, the attempt to whip people into a frenzy of hatred and loathing, and to distract them from the reality of their own lives. (Even the brilliant George Orwell could not imagine Fox News and its 24/7 exercise in hate.) With Wikileaks the US never addresses the content of the documents, the dark and dirty secrets of the war makers, the cozy don't ask/don't tell relationship with the nastiest dictators on earth, stunning violence and the cold rationalization, the murderousness followed by the lies, deception, and cover-ups, and never faces the most obvious and damning truth of the whole affair: we, too, live in a barricaded, secret society, a garrison state that supports and is supported by a war culture.

Resisting the war culture and the degrading of democracy is a way to sing the dark times, too. War culture is everywhere: at athletic events where everyone is expected to sing ritualistic patriotic songs at the start, and where uniformed and armed people march with flags onto the field of play; at airports where uniformed military people are given a designated waiting area and

priority boarding; in our schools where military recruiters have free reign; in our language, where “service” is degraded and distorted to mean time in the uniformed military. Just as a little blue-sky exercise, imagine any bit of the war culture transformed into a peace and love culture: the super bowl opening with thousands of local school kids rushing through the stands distributing their poetry, and then everyone singing “This Land is Your Land” or “Give Peace a Chance,” or “We Shall Overcome”; an airlines clerk saying, “We want to invite any teachers or nurses in the gate area to board first, and we thank you for your service.”

The US spends a trillion dollars a year on war and preparation for war, more than the rest of the world combined. The war culture accepts that as a desire for peace. The US has military bases stretching across the globe, including a base in the Italian Alps, and yet there are no Italian air bases in the Catskills, for example. The war culture sees that as sensible and necessary. The war culture is everywhere, sometimes visible and always lurking in the shadows.

There has been disappointment in these dark times from many who had hoped for something more from this young administration, but that disappointment is, I believe, misplaced, and reveals something deeper: the degradation of the essential spirit and culture of democracy. Authentic democracy is direct democracy, and it can only function when people feel themselves to be free and equal, powerful and engaged. As a radical egalitarian my guiding principle in these matters is simply stated: “Every cook can govern!” This means that *we, the people* are the sovereign, and that we must see ourselves in a new, empowered, and more fully developed light.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci emphasized that the class that dominates society does so by maintaining *ideological control* as much as through brute force. In order to become truly liberated and free, people need to overcome their belief that it’s a normal and natural state of affairs for a ruling class to rule or a political class to govern, and overcome, as well, the idea that the road to fulfillment or happiness is to become a wealthy, successful member of the unjust and stratified society we all take as a given. The extraordinary ordinary people are those who are capable of fundamentally changing the world.

This concept is a revolutionary challenge and not a marketing tool announcing that everybody has the *capacity* to become more worthy. Gramsci’s notion is a world apart from the irritating “mission statement” of the Gates Foundation, read every morning on NPR, announcing their belief that every child should have a *chance* to lead a full and productive life—not the right to actually *lead* that life, but merely a *chance* at it, and a diminishing one at that. There’s a big difference between those who envision a philanthropic society where the people of property and privilege share some of their largess with the less fortunate through a governing class that rules as a kind of Lady Bountiful

with beneficent kindness and fairness, and those radical egalitarians, revolutionaries, working toward the creation of a robust public square, a commons characterized by shared ownership of community property, as well as a society built on the unshakable faith in a quite radical proposition: every human being is of incalculable value, each endowed with artistic and intellectual capacity, and envision, then, a society that is actually self-governing, with a revolving cast of people taking responsibility for the functions of government.

Staring at the sites of power—Wall Street, the Pentagon, the White House, Congress—is not for serious practitioners of a culture or a spirit of democracy. We must come to see that there is also power in the neighborhood, the shop, the factory and the field, the classroom and the street—and that’s the only power we have access to. So every time we’re tempted to say, “I wish they would end these senseless wars,” or “I wish we had won on universal health care,” we must respond with this: Have I done what I could today to build an unstoppable force for peace? Have I been part of shifting the frame, connecting the issues, building a movement?

I’m sometimes told that I sound like an optimist, but I assure you I’m not. An optimist is either prescient or naïve, and I’m neither. I don’t know how things will turn out (no one does), so I’m not a pessimist either. Rather, I’m hopeful, because we are living in a swirling uncertain history in the making, and I choose to get up every day and open my eyes, pay as much attention as I can bear, be astonished at the beauty and the horror of it all, and then to act, to doubt, and to act again.

Hope is a choice; confidence is a politics. Hope in no way minimizes the horror, but it holds out the possibility of change. We can and must develop the ability (in ourselves no less than in our students) to see life as infused with a capacity to cherish happiness, to respect evidence and argument and reason, to uphold integrity, and to hope and work for a world more loving, peaceful, and more fair than the one we inherited. Hope is the capacity to notice or invent alternatives and possibilities for action. Of course we live in dark times, and some of us inhabit even darker places, and, of course we act mostly in the dark. But we are free as teachers and thinkers mostly when we sing the dark times, refusing to see the situation or the world before us as the end of the matter.

Education in a democracy—at least theoretically—is distinct from education under an authoritarian regime, a dictatorship or a monarchy, in a particular way. In a democracy, life is geared toward and powered by a particularly precious and fragile ideal: every human being is of infinite and incalculable value, each a unique intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual, moral, and creative force; each person is born free and equal in dignity and rights, each endowed with reason and conscience, each deserving, then, a community of solidarity, a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, recognition

and respect. This core value is the heart of the matter, and it must express itself explicitly and implicitly in education as in every other aspect of associative living.

All schools, of course, serve the societies in which they're embedded—an ancient agrarian community apprentices the young for participation in that world, apartheid schools mirror an apartheid society, and so on. In fact, an outsider can learn a lot about any society by simply peeking into its classrooms—the old South Africa had beautiful palaces of learning and small state-of-the-art classes for the white kids and overcrowded, dilapidated, and ill-equipped classes for the African kids. It makes perfect and perverse sense. Conversely, our outside observer could deduce what classrooms must look like if she could take an accurate measure of the larger community—knowing what apartheid means and does, she could have guessed the schools looked as they did.

Schools serve society; society is reflected in its schools. And in the modern world we see some differences as well as interesting similarities and noteworthy overlapping goals across systems. School leaders in fascist Germany or communist Albania or medieval Saudi Arabia or apartheid South Africa, for example, all agreed that students should behave well, stay away from drugs and crime, and master the subject matters, so those things don't differentiate a democratic education from any other. We all want the kids to do well. Practically all schools want their students to study hard and do their homework. Furthermore, schools in fascist Germany produced some excellent scientists and athletes and musicians and so on. They also produced obedience and conformity, moral blindness and easy agreement, obtuse patriotism and a willingness to follow orders right into the furnaces. In a democracy one would expect something different—and this takes us to first principles: democracy is based on a common faith in the incalculable value of every human being, and that means that whatever the wisest and most privileged parents want for their kids is exactly what the community wants as a minimum standard for all of its children.

Arne Duncan as well as the Obama children attended the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools (as did our three sons), where they had small classes, abundant resources, and opportunities to experiment and explore, ask questions and pursue answers to the far limits. Oh, and a respected and unionized teacher corps as well. Good enough for the Obamas and Duncans, good enough for the kids in public schools everywhere. Any other ideal for our schools, in the words of Dewey, “is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy.”

This core value and first principle—the irreducible value if each—has huge implications for educational policy: racial segregation is wrong, class separation unjust, disparate funding immoral. There is simply no justification in a democracy for the existence of one school for wealthy white kids funded to

the tune of \$25,000 per student per year, and another school for poor immigrant kids or the descendants of formerly enslaved people with access to \$5,000 per student per year. That reality—a reality in Illinois and across the country—offends the very idea that each person is equal in value and regard, and reflects instead the reactionary idea that some of us are more deserving and more valuable than others. It also expresses the simple but crude and cruel message we send to children in the concerning social policy toward them: Choose the Right Parents! If you choose parents with money, access, social connection, privilege, your choices and your chances will expand; if not, sorry, you're on your own.

The democratic injunction has big implications for curriculum and teaching as well, for what is taught and how. We want our students to be able to think for themselves, to make judgments based on evidence and argument, to develop minds of their own. We want them to ask fundamental questions—who in the world am I? How did I get here and where am I going? What in the world are my choices? How in the world shall I proceed?—and to pursue the answers wherever they might take them. We refuse obedience and conformity in favor of teaching initiative, courage, imagination, creativity, and more. These qualities cannot be delivered in top-down ways, but must be modeled and nourished, encouraged and defended.

Democratic teaching encourages students to develop the capacity to name the world for themselves, to identify the obstacles to their full humanity, and the courage to act upon whatever the known demands. This kind of education is characteristically eye-popping and mind-blowing—always about opening doors and opening minds as students forge their own pathways into a wider, shared world.

HOW DO OUR SCHOOLS HERE AND NOW MEASURE UP TO THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL?

Much of what we call schooling forecloses or shuts down or walls off meaningful choice-making. Much of it is based on obedience and conformity, the hallmarks of every authoritarian regime throughout history. Much of it banishes the unpopular, squirms in the presence of the unorthodox, hides the unpleasant. There's little space for skepticism, irreverence, questioning, or doubt. While many of us long for teaching as something transcendent and powerful, we find ourselves too often locked in situations that reduce teaching to a kind of glorified clerking, passing along a curriculum of received wisdom and predigested and often false bits of information. This is a recipe for disaster in the long run.

In the contested space of schools and education reform we might press to change the dominant discourse that has controlled the discussion for many years. That controlling discourse posits education as a commodity rather than a right and a journey, and it imagines schools as little factories cranking out

products. The metaphor leads easily to imagining school closings and privatizing the public space as natural, relentless standardized testing as sensible—this is what the true-believers call “reform.” Without even a nod at evidence the “the free-market reformers” march merrily forward fronting the dogma of privatization and union-bashing for the sake of better schools. Of course evidence is always the enemy of dogma, and this is faith-based, fact-free school policy at its purest.

In this moment of rising expectations combined with deep and abiding crisis, this moment of “yes we can” and will we survive, it’s a perfect time to re-think and re-imagine the frames we’ve suffered with too long. Since the Barack Obama victory, many people seem to be suffering a kind of post-partum depression: unable to find any polls to obsess over, folks read the tea leaves and try to penetrate the president’s mind. What do his moves portend? What magic or disaster awaits us? With due respect, this is a matter of looking entirely in the wrong direction.

Obama is not a monarch—Arne Duncan is not education czar—and we are not his subjects. If we want a foreign policy based on justice, for example, we ought to get busy organizing a robust anti-imperialist peace movement; if we want to end the death penalty we’d better get smart about changing the dominant narrative concerning crime and punishment. We are not allowed to sit quietly in a democracy awaiting salvation from above. We are equal, and we all need to speak up and speak out right now.

During Arne Duncan’s tenure in Chicago, a group of hunger-striking mothers organized city-wide support and won the construction of a new high school in a community that had been underserved and denied for years. Another group of parents, teachers, and students mobilized to push military recruiters out of their high school; Duncan didn’t support them and he certainly didn’t lead the charge, but they won anyway. If they’d waited for Duncan to act they’d likely be waiting still. Teachers at another school refused to give one of the endless standardized tests, arguing that this was one test too many, and they organized deep and wide support for their protest; Duncan didn’t support them either, but they won anyway. If they’d waited for Duncan, they’d be waiting still. Why would anyone sit around waiting for Arne now? Stop whining; get busy.

We might articulate and re-ignite the basic proposition that the fullest development of all is the necessary condition for the full development of each, and conversely, that the fullest development of each is necessary for the full development of all—none of us can be all we need to be unless our brothers and sisters are all that they need to be. We focus our efforts, then, not on the production of things so much as on the production of fully developed human beings who are capable of controlling and transforming their own lives, citizens who can participate fully in our shared public life.

Educators, students, and citizens might press now for an education worthy of a democracy, including an end to sorting people into winners and losers through expensive standardized tests which act as pseudo-scientific forms of surveillance; an end to starving schools of needed resources and then blaming teachers and their unions for dismal outcomes; and an end to “savage inequalities” and the rapidly accumulating “educational debt,” the resources due to communities historically segregated, under-funded and under-served. All children and youth in a democracy, regardless of economic circumstance, deserve full access to richly-resourced classrooms led by caring, thoughtful, fully-qualified and generously compensated teachers.

This is our ongoing expression of and commitment to free inquiry and participation, access and equity, free thought and independent judgment, and full recognition of the humanity of each in the company of all. The struggle continues.

Those of us who hope for a world at peace and in balance, crackling with the surprising and contradictory harmonies of love, not love merely in the personal sense, but love as a state of being, not in the infantile sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of daring and growth, those of us who seek both joy and justice, those of us who want the US to live up to its better angels, those of us who imagine becoming a people among people, a nation among nations, must lift every voice and sing, and release our wild and free imaginations—our art and humor and creative energies—to defeat the plodding and murderous and instrumentalist logic of war and authoritarianism. Theirs is a calculus of conquest and pain, ours a measure of healing and possibility.

Say goodbye to complacency in a heartless world, to deference, didacticism, ego and the need to always be right, goodbye to prisons and border guards and walls—whether in Palestine or in Texas—and goodbye to quarantines, deletions, and closures. Goodbye to all that. Welcome to a world that is overflowing with life, stunning in its hope for a better world; welcome to the unknown, to jumping off the edge, to the dance of the dialectic; welcome to endlessly learning how to live again and love anew, to embracing relentless curiosity, the poetics of resistance, history, and agency, simple acts of kindness, the complexity of humanity, the wonder of it all. Welcome to a new day in the making—world peace and inner peace. Each day in every way, sing it loud and vote for love—all kinds of love for all kinds of people in all kinds of circumstances and situations. Embrace a new world in the making, and then dare to taste it with a kiss.
