

**PUBLIC EDUCATION IN CRISIS  
REV. DON ROLLINS  
NOVEMBER 5, 2006**

His name was Bob Lewis, and his face was the first I would see at the beginning of most every school day from 1964 until 1972. Bob Lewis drove the #14 school bus. He was kind, funny and not at all reticent to put a kid in line for what he called “acting like a monkey on dope.” And I needed the kindness and good humor Bob afforded me – some years more than others, depending on the classroom management skills of whichever unfortunate teacher drew my name in the great crapshoot of public education. (The only marks that were lower than my behavior were those for what we used to call “penmanship.”)

Bob Lewis’ positive attitude came in most handy in 1964, when as a third-grader I became the property of one Miss Gladys McDaniel. She managed to retain a stiff Scots-Irish upper lip in the face of my best and relentless efforts to make each working day of her life a living hell. Gladys was short, heavy and tough as a Billy goat. By the time I landed in one of her oak-and-metal desks, she had seen some twenty-five years of class clowns come and go; she was a battle-hardened veteran who could have written the book about how to deal with county boys several sizes too big for their britches. And for all my considerable talents for annoying others, Miss McDaniel could not be rattled. She single-handedly made my third grade experience the most challenging of my entire elementary school career!

Call it karma, God’s will or sweet justice, but I would eventually come to appreciate what it took for Gladys to keep her cool and do her job. A rookie teacher, standing in front of my own class – some thirty high school seniors, most of whom cared not a whit about studying U.S. Government – I conjured up the ghost of Miss McDaniel when one of my charges used a cell phone to have a pizza delivered to me in the middle of class. I channeled Gladys, took a deep breath, paid for the pizza...and ate it right there!

In retrospect, Gladys was a professional. By all accounts of the student teachers she’d mentored over the decades, she believed that public education is a flawed but serviceable vehicle for some very important things. And she worked to change it from the inside out.

Over the years I’ve met lots of teachers like Gladys McDaniel. By and large, they’re the ones who know that public schools are in need of some tough professionals. They’re the educators who push their colleagues, administrators and local school boards to try new ideas. They’re the educators who are stand-up men and women, people who make do despite the latest round of state budget cuts, reaching into their own pockets along

**the way. They're the educators who police their own ranks as a means of weeding out those who diminish their profession. They're the educators who know that standardized tests and incentive pay and the president's "No Child Left Behind" mandates are band-aid solutions. Then too, they're the educators who ask the tough questions: Why is parental involvement so chronically low? Why are we still using a system of property taxation to fund education, thereby insuring vast differences in the quality of education? Why place so much emphasis on science and math only to risk turning out people who can do calculus but ignore citizenship? Why establish charter schools and alternative schools only to under-fund them? Why allow public education to be the scapegoat for political infighting at the local, state and federal levels? And, why blame classroom teachers, above all others, for the antiquated system of public education in America?**

**Tough professionals. We need those tough, focused professionals.**

**And they need us. For months now, forty-six school superintendents across Minnesota have been crossing their fingers in anticipation of a yes vote to their proposed referendums, ISD 88 superintendent Harold Remme among them. Money is tight all over, and those administrators know that cuts in funding mean cuts in staff and/or programs. (It makes me nuts, this suspicion and negativity that we've been sold when it comes to public schools.) But my obvious and passionate bias aside, it's not my place to tell you how to vote, and you wouldn't listen anyway! To be fair, I'm not even a property owner in this school district. And you're bright and informed people who can make up your own minds on this issue, thus constraint is called for.**

**But I don't feel constrained to the point of ignoring public education itself. The local school referendum, whatever else it is, is a prime opportunity to reflect on a public education system that is clearly in crisis – a system that, for all its many ailments, still serves as the single most force for social unity in this country. It's also an opportunity to revisit the influence two Unitarians had on American education, reminding us that liberal religion and public education have grown up together.**

**Gladys McDaniel, my even tempered-third grade teacher, was a devout Presbyterian. She didn't make much fuss about her faith, but given that she was an institution in her church as well as her school, we all knew where she stood when it came to religion. She was a staunch Calvinist. But some of her youngest protégés were still teaching when I returned to my home town to teach. And to my private glee, they say she quoted from Emerson and Thoreau when it came to poetry, and she cited Horace Mann and John Dewey when it came to public education, Unitarians all. For all the theology she would surely have challenged, Gladys found in those freethinkers a voice for her view of education.**

Mann and Dewey naturally play second fiddle to more modern educational philosophers. But I find that they also remain relatively obscure in our own circles. So as we visit the matter of education – specifically *liberal* religion in public schools – I want to make the point that these two figures not only shaped the American education of the past, but may also have something to offer the American education systems of today and tomorrow.

Horace Mann (1796-1859) was a teacher, politician and abolitionist from Massachusetts. Calling for a free public school system that would extend from age thirteen to age sixteen, he was among the first to propose a curriculum that was at once classical and practical - appreciative of philosophy and music and the arts, yet useful in most any vocation.

It was Horace Mann who championed better pay for teachers, more and better-equipped schoolhouses and classes designed specifically for helping immigrants assimilate into American society. He understood a good education to be the “birthright” of both rich and poor. And, most importantly, he believed that public education was behind only family and religion as the means by which to sustain any sense of community amidst such increasing cultural diversity.

John Dewey (1859-1952) was an educator, philosopher and author. He looked to Plato and Rousseau for his staunch belief that society and the individual are interdependent. For John Dewey, as for his considerably talented wife, Alice, teaching should apply to daily life and avoid what they called “dead facts.” (They were known to use cooking as a way to teach their children chemistry, physics and biology.) Thus John Dewey’s approach to education became known as Pragmatism, a school of philosophy that exists to this day.

Dewey was more interested in teaching people how learn than how to memorize data. For him, the well-rounded American was the one who developed intellect, critical thinking and problem solving. And, with Horace Mann, he believed that every person is built to be in community. His three-tiered theory of education called for: *Self-action*, taking responsibility for our unique selves; *Interaction*, balancing that self against things, places and other people; and *Transaction*, the self *in community*, engaging in a lifelong process of open inquiry and spiritual growth.

I bring Mann and Dewey into our discussion of modern American public education because, like most religious liberals, they envisioned a system that does not parse the world into tidy categories of “secular” and “sacred”; they knew that a free and universal education serves as the very backbone of a nation so steeped in individualism, immigration and unchecked capitalism. Both men advocated against religion-based private schools, partly out of jealousy, but also because, in Mann and Dewey’s

eyes, for every student that opted out of the public system the nation would lose a piece of a common culture and destiny. And while many of today's private schools are obviously excellent, we might also listen to our forbears' counsel to ask if what is gained by the individual is not lost to the whole.

Community. I evoke these two Unitarian educators because with their emphasis on community as part of public education, they force us to get real about what it takes to give Suzie and Johnnie a solid foundation for life while also holding the nation together. For Mann and Dewey, spiritual interdependence between the individual and the nation was not abstract; the health and vigor of the one was tethered directly to the other. For them, *all* education is religious because *all* of life is religious. But they also saw the need for a nation as kind as it is free, thus they believed in community.

Let's not leave the link between liberal religion and public education in the distant past, for the two are as intertwined now as ever. Think about all education, public or otherwise, as religious. Think about public education and its relationship to immigration, ethnicity and citizenship. Think about public education and its relationship to sex education, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and health care. Think about public education and its relationship to juvenile substance use, juvenile crime, juvenile courts and juvenile detention centers. Think about public education and gang wars, culture wars and real wars. Think about all the various burdens we ask our public schools to shoulder; is it realistic to hold educators to a standard that the very legislators who created it cannot or will not meet? Do we really believe that chronic budget cuts, staff reductions, program eliminations and an increase in school shootings are anything but symptoms of a system in need of serious rethinking? And if our public schools really are failing (a term that is itself debatable) can we seriously doubt that the crisis in public education is to American society what global warming is to the whole world: a bell-weather warning that we share a fate, like it or not?

I apologize – with much more gusto than either Senator John Kerry or the Rev. Ted Haggard could muster last week – if I've put a damper on an otherwise serene Sunday morning. To balance the ledger, we ought never lose sight of the many educators who continue to use their intelligence, creativity, patience and humor to help turn out some amazing human beings. But when standardized test scores become the primary measure of excellence among both students and teachers, and superintendents and school boards have to beg for legitimate and necessary funding, even the best educators can only do so much. We're almost certainly wrong if we think public education can survive without help from the general public. And you and I are part of that general public.

**So what's public education got to do with religion? I would answer with some more tough questions about what religion should be doing on behalf of public education. Who are those teachers, students and staff to us? Are they holy person engaged in the holy task of learning, or are they simply a rise in our property taxes? Is public education a *thing* or a living, dynamic system? Are those just students or are they really tomorrow's leaders? And with regard to community, are we ready to surrender the various functions that our public schools provide? If so, what will take its place? And who will fund it?**

**Nora friends, however we cut it, the same principles that gave rise to liberal religion in the country gave rise to the nation: freedom and responsibility; equality and justice; reason and compassion; hope and sweat. We have, as they say further south, a dog in this fight.**

**By my lights, one can care deeply about public education and vote either way come Tuesday; the goal here is not to twist arms on behalf of the ISD 88 referendum, despite my obvious bias. No matter how those of you in this school district decide to vote, I hope that you'll join the effort to affect positive change in public education. If nothing else, at least encourage those administrators, classroom teachers, school board members, state officials and elected politicians who know that band-aid solutions are a waste of time, effort and hope. We don't have to be experts at educational philosophy to spot those who are working for positive change, we have only to be willing to explore, listen, discern and act. We can do it for each and every student, for a nation, for a system in crisis. Perhaps we can even support public education on behalf of a long-dead, third-grade teacher who once upon a time sided with the Unitarians...if only on the matter of public education.**