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Now Is Time to Embrace the Civic and Moral Purposes of Education

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I wish I lived in a country in which the unconstrained expression of racist and xenophobic ideas from candidates for president of the United States engendered enough public condemnation to cause immediate and unredeemable rejection. I wish politicians, whatever their personal beliefs, felt compelled to keep such poisonous thoughts to themselves. That restraint would signify a healthier more humane national culture.

Our country has arrived at (or maybe, returned to) this deeply disturbing state of affairs for many reasons, including the unrestrained influence of money in political campaigns, political gerrymandering, sensationalist media culture, and the long tradition of stoking bigotry for political and economic gains. Addressing the complex causes will not be easy or quick.

Schools cannot solve every societal problem and this is no exception. However, education can contribute to a long-term solution. To do so, parents, educators and education policy makers will need to embrace a broader civic and moral purpose of schools. All educated, morally-grounded Americans should find suggestions of mass deportation, double border fences, or religious qualifications for political asylum morally repugnant.

The facile inclination to blame the "other" for our society's difficult and complex problems is certainly not new. What is most troubling is that it continues to reemerge in response to the very behavior we deplore. Are these reactions an intractable feature of human nature or learned? Is this all-to-common tendency subject to constraint and malleable? I choose to believe that it is and that public education can play a significant positive role.

Let's consider the full spectrum otherness-driven inhumanity from perpetrators of terrorism to mass shootings to hate-speech to passive acceptance.

With some regularity, we read about young people who join or identify with groups that espouse hatred. Some of these individuals go on to commit unfathomable atrocities, and we ask, "What makes ordinary people commit such evil?" However, dismissing such abhorrent deeds as uniquely Islamic, psychologically-driven deviance, or the isolated deeds of socially maladjusted "wing-nuts" would be a counterproductive mistake. Distressingly, atrocities in the name of a cause are part of a long, well documented, and shared historic tradition. The frequency- and indeed the commonness- of such events calls to my mind, Hannah Arendt's famous phrase, the banality of evil, in an especially personal, but nonetheless common, way.

I was riding home on the school bus and overheard a remark by a boy I'll call Fred, a classmate sitting in the row behind me. It was sometime between the 1960 capture and 1961 trial of Nazi war criminal, Adolph Eichmann. "They should have killed six million more," Fred said- to whom I do not know. I was about ten or eleven years old and one of only a few Jews in my community. According to comments I heard at the dinner table, his father was an anti-Semite. I was told that when the local Jewish Community Center planned to build a facility on property adjoining his, he tried to block it and asserted, "This is a Christian country." Many decades later, I remember the bus incident vividly. At the time, I was too timid and isolated to respond. I still regret my childhood silence. However what is important to me now is how our country can avoid raising more Freds.

I know that I am not unique in either my experience or response, nor is it uncommon for children, like Fred, to learn and adopt the bigotry of their parents and those around them. In my silence, was I complicit in abetting the normalcy of hatred? I do not know, but I am certain that schools can mediate learned bigotry. I am certain that we must understand as a nation how to develop young people who identify with

rather than ignore the suffering of "the other." I am certain we must find the means to develop young people who are reflexively outraged when they hear bigoted ideas and when they witness inhumanity and who have the courage to speak up in response. This youth development should be our national moral imperative.

From perpetration to acquiescence, inhumanity exists on a continuum. Its range is wide, but surely includes the unmediated poverty that leads to lives of misery, disease, and starvation, as well as ethnic and religious persecution and inequity. As a human being, a Jew and an educator, I think about how and why people of apparent high moral character- within their relatively circumscribed circle of associations- turn away from evil almost daily. I refuse to believe that such behavior, while ubiquitous, is inevitable.

What can we do, not just on a personal level, but as a society, so that people refuse to partake in, and instead, act to prevent hate speech and human suffering from becoming normative? What can we do so that in times of crisis, citizens reject demagogic appeals to racial, religious or ethnic exclusivity and blame? I believe that the organization and content of our educational system poses one building block in a process of responding to this moral imperative.

In education, there are some seemingly mundane, but no less profound and impactful, steps we can take:

- 1) Promote and incentivize inclusive schools in which students regularly experience positive interaction across racial, religious, socioeconomic differences. Hate thrives in conditions of isolation. We need integrated schools. The mere proximity of children in schools does not ensure the young people will bridge deeply rooted historical differences. That requires leadership and intentional programming. However, it is unlikely shared humanity will develop when diversity is the exception.
- 2) Promote schools that attend as much to students' social and emotional development and well-being as their academic achievement. We need class sizes small enough, so teachers can pay attention to classroom dynamics and what is happening in the lives of individual students. We can naively hope that social skills and dispositions such as empathy develop at home, but that would be a blind abdication. Fred learned to hate at home. School can provide countervailing experiences.
- 3) Engage students in wrestling with ethical and moral dilemmas. Virtually every subject area provides current and historical contexts to examine personal and societal decision-making in which judgments about values, beliefs and evidence affect humanity. In school, students can practice and experience ethical behaviors so that then can become internalized and valued.
- 4) Provide students a sense of community and support to mediate personal alienation. Organizations with antipathy to outsiders, almost always provide a sense of belonging to their recruits. While schools alone cannot eliminate the alienation endemic in modern society, they can be important sanctuaries in which every student is known and valued.
- 5) Practice and value democracy and tolerance for ambiguity. Extremist movements provide the deceiving security and rigid certainty of authoritarian rule and gain power when personal agency and negotiation seem hopeless. When handled expertly, schools can provide opportunities for students and teachers to experience, practice and study both the frustrations and importance of democracy.

There are no simple love and hate solutions that could have boosted my childhood courage or prevented Fred's hurtful comments. Maybe he even grew up to reject his father's anti-Semitism. Powerful forces support the continuum of inhumanity. In our own history- from the religious intolerance of the Puritans to the current efforts of a powerful minority to prevent marriage equality or reproductive rights- the impulse to impose moral certitude on others has been a constant. Simplistic transfer of blame for complex problems to the latest newcomers to our teeming shores has a long, inglorious history in the United States. However, changes to our educational system could increase the likelihood that students grow up to become adults with a greater propensity to value and develop a humane society than to suspend or ignore their personal moral responsibilities.

To do so, our nation will need to move beyond the narrow focus of education reform on raising test scores and preparation for current jobs. Educators are at times loath to engage their students in potentially volatile issues. Their fear of retribution, lack of support and worry about whether they have the skill set to do so are reasonable. However, these concerns can be addressed, if we re-embrace our core national values of decency and respect.

Times of national stress are precisely the wrong moments to destructively turn on one another or to abandon our message of welcome engraved on our Statue of Liberty.

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