



## Diversity: What Schools Leave Out

*Edward L. Whitfield*

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**Cover picture:**

In Little Rock Arkansas in 1957, nine children were confronted with the Arkansas National Guard to prevent them from attending my alma mater Little Rock Central High School.

They were fighting “real” segregation.

*Ed Whitfield*

**Photo from *The Arkansas Gazette***



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## **Dedication:**

*This book is dedicated to my father, Mr. Robert Whitfield, who was my first teacher. While he never claimed to have all the answers, he freed my intellect by letting me know that there was no such thing as a dumb question.*

*It is dedicated to my mother, Mrs. Winifred Whitfield who has always supported me in whatever I do. Now, at the age of 91, and after 39 years of teaching in elementary classrooms, she still lets me know that there are things that children need that they are not getting.*

*It is also dedicated to my two older brothers Robert and Richard and my sister Winifred. They probably do not realize the full extent to which they sparked my interest in science, mathematics, mechanical devices and social justice.*

*This book is dedicated to my two adult children, Nandi and Kazi. As they grew up, they challenged my capacity to be a mature adult and parent, but they remain a source of great pride.*

*But most of all this book is dedicated to my three bright, beautiful and inquisitive granddaughters. They are the future, and it is to them that I dedicate this book and my efforts to make a better world.*



Kailen Whitfield – daughter of Kazi and Nicey



Kaih Whitfield – daughter of Kazi and Nicey



Ellise Canty – daughter of Nandi and Les



Ellise and my mother Mrs. Winifred Whitfield





## Introduction

This is a collection of essays, speeches newspaper columns and poetry written during the last 6 years, or so. Everything written here is concrete and about something that was taking place at the time. The dates are included where possible so that the pieces can be considered in their specificity. I recognize that some of the things that are described here have changed somewhat since these documents were written, but I still think that the complete picture that they represent is still essentially sound and is in fact, a coherent way to look at educational issues related to community, diversity, and the world we live in.

While many of the pieces here might be controversial, They come from about 40 years of engaging with people in the community about what they think about the educational system as well as considerable amounts of reading and reflection on the questions at hand. These pieces represent my best synthesis and my best thinking and I have always been willing to think “outside the box “

For those who think that these views represent giving up on integration and diversity, I want to register my disagreement up front: The goal of a truly fair, wholesome, supportive society where people approach their potential is indeed my goal. The problem is that too many of the things that are being done in the name of that goal simply don't make sense to me when examined dispassionately. I also think that the answer to any problem comes from looking closely at the problem itself. In this sense, this is a thoroughly optimistic view of what we need to be doing. We have to set it in our minds, however not to simply continue to do what we are doing even when we see that it is not working and children are suffering.

Finally, I want to say a word about who I am: I am a social activist, musician, mathematician, philosopher and essayist. I have written for newspapers, magazines, and community groups on questions of education as well as peace and justice.

## **On the Question of Diversity**

A Brief Look at the Down Side of the Struggle for Diversity in Public Education

### ***The Price of Diversity***

Those of us who support neighborhood schools know that there is an argument to be made for diversity. People can and should learn from each other. Cross-cultural contact is an important part of the overall educational process and is very important in a multicultural society. But as we seek these advantages we must ask the price. Certainly it would be unfair to Black children if we required them to accept the status of lab experiments, to be studied and examined for the benefit of white children's education. Certainly it would be unfair to them if we required that they always explain or defend the actions and attitudes of all the other members of their race. Certainly it would be unfair to them if we consistently put them in situations where the economic disparity between their communities and others was an ongoing source of ridicule. Certainly it would be unfair for us to force them to go to schools so far out of their communities that they felt alienated, isolated and unloved. The sad fact is that we have done all these things and more in the name of diversity.

The busing of children from the area around English Village and Morningside Homes to Claxton elementary school borders on being criminal. Small children from the poorest part of Greensboro took long bus rides each morning to the wealthiest part of Greensboro. There, too many of them were made to feel insecure, inadequate and unloved in a remote, hostile and unfamiliar surrounding. The parents of these children felt uncomfortable on those occasions when they could find a way to the school to be involved with the children. How do children who didn't get to go to Emerald Point during the summer talk about their vacations with those who spent the summer on the Riviera? It isn't fair, and it isn't necessary.

### ***Building True Understanding***

We need to know, that it is not simply contact between people, but rather, it is the interaction of different people as equals that builds understanding and respect between the races.

During slavery there was a considerable amount of contact at all levels (economic, social, and personal intimacy) between Blacks and whites, yet no mutual respect emerged. Each party acted out his role in a historically staged play with the predictable consequence that everyone's preconceived notion was reinforced by what he

saw. Relations of power and domination generated the inequity of the interaction. It was like actors standing behind their masks in a Greek play where their real features and their real humanity was invisible to the audience and to themselves. This is pretty much what has been observed in many of the relations developed in public schools in the period of forced busing. White students and teachers who think of Black people as lazy and ignorant have been reinforced in that self-fulfilling perception by what they saw in these institutions that they had created for themselves. To the extent that many Black youth felt alienated and abused by the educational system, whites saw their behavior in response to this as proof of the existing stereotypes. Black people, who felt that whites were hostile, insensitive and deceptive, felt justified with their observance of the conduct of many white students playing out those roles.

The interaction as equals, that builds true understanding and respect between people, is only possible when our youth have a sense of their own identity and the tools and skills to succeed. They must feel self-confident, socially aware and have their creative energies unleashed. Supportive and nurturing neighborhood schools play a role in creating the atmosphere in which this can take place. We will need to develop more situations and processes where people do come into contact with each other as equals. This may include athletic competition, extramural academic interaction, cultural expositions and conscious dialog sessions. The public schools have so far proven not to be very good at this. The task of creating opportunities for interaction as equals may be difficult at first, given the history of racism, cultural isolation and cultural chauvinism. But it can and must be worked out.

### ***The Problem with Magnet Schools***

Magnet schools have been raised as a means of developing diversity without coercion, but they too present many serious problems. Magnet schools were developed as a method of achieving integration without forced busing. The idea was to create "super schools" using the latest innovation, best teachers and best resources and put these schools inside the Black community to attract white students. Seats in these schools were set aside for the white students who were being sought. It is ironic that one of the results of a struggle by Black people for access to better educational resources for their children was the establishment of institutions, in the Black community, that are not concerned with better educating Black children, but rather serve only the purpose of attracting white children.

There were instances where quotas were established and Black children were excluded from magnet school programs in their communities with empty seats for the purpose of saving spaces for white children who did not want to go. This was the insanity of using segregation - the forceful exclusion of some children because of their race - to fight for integration - the mixing of Black and white children in school buildings. It never made any sense, but when it was questioned, the response was that the federal guidelines required it.

Two things are fundamentally wrong with the magnet school concept: First, if we know better what children really need for their education, we have a responsibility to provide it for all the children, not just for a select few who get into magnet programs. Second, it obviously makes no sense at all to seek to correct the exclusion of Black children from better educational opportunities by excluding them from the best schools that are placed in Black communities to attract white children. The results of the magnet process are as ridiculous as the assumptions upon which it rests. We end up with two separate schools, one overwhelmingly Black and poor, the other majority white and affluent, with different teachers and different classrooms for different students all housed under one roof, sharing only toilet and lunch facilities.

### ***Going Hungry is Not Good Preparation for Famine***

Another argument some people will make for diversity is that it will prepare our children for the problems they will face as adults. The idea that we should throw our children into hostile educational environments at an early age so they can learn to deal with the racism and animosity of the society is pure foolishness. You don't prepare for a famine by fasting. All that might do is condition you to the pain you will encounter but it will not give you the stored up nutrition that will allow you to make it through it. If you know you are going where food is scarce, it is better to overeat for a while.

Our children will see enough real racism, discrimination and isolation in the world as adults. As children we need to fill them so full of themselves that they are self-confident and no one can make them doubt themselves. That is why the idea of a wholesome, nurturing educational environment controlled by the community is so important. When our children face the irrationality and insanity of the society, they should question the society and not themselves. It is out of creatively questioning the society with a deep sense of commitment and responsibility to our community that we can inspire the thinking required to answer to the question "how do we fix what is wrong?"

## ***A Children's Story:***

### **On the Mountaintop Preparation for Living Down in the Valley**

4/5/99

Once upon a time there was a group of children. They lived with their families down in the valley. There were many things they did down in the valley that no one did anywhere else. When they were down in the valley, they played valley games. When they were in the valley, they ate valley food. When they were in the valley they talked valley talk. And when they were in the valley they walked a special valley walk that no one who lived outside the valley ever walked.

If the people in the valley looked up and to the west, they could see high upon the mountain nearby. Up on the mountain, they could faintly make out the shapes of the mountain people and their children. "I wonder," said some of the people in the valley "if it would be alright for us to go up on the top of the mountain, too." And so, some of them took up the difficult task of climbing to the top of the mountain to take a look.

When the mountain people saw the valley people coming up the hill, most of them didn't like it. One of them tried to make a name for himself by standing in the mountain pass and saying he would never let them up to the top of the mountain. Some of them pushed the valley people back down to the bottom of the mountain and would not let them get up. Some of the mountain people caught valley people and hurt them and did unspeakably mean things to them to maintain the purity of the mountaintop. The valley people fought long and hard to be able to get to the top of the mountain.

Not all of the mountain people were mean like that. A few mountain people even decided that it was OK for the people in the valley to come up to the top of the mountain. They helped some of the valley people who were trying to get up to the top. Finally, after years of struggle, and with the help of some of the people from the mountain, a few valley people made it to the top of the mountain. The valley people thought they were free at last from the valley and they celebrated. Once they had made it to the top of the mountain, some of the valley people decided they wanted to stay on the top of the mountain. Other valley people had their curiosity satisfied and went back down to their homes at the bottom of the valley.

The people at the top of the mountain were a little different from the valley people. While it is true, that there were some mountain people who helped the valley people up the mountain, even those mountain people didn't want the valley people to bring their valley ways up the mountain with them. "Now, those things are alright down in

the valley," the mountain people would say, "but up here on top of the mountain you have to act the mountain way to fit in and be accepted." The people from the valley thought this was strange, particularly coming from many of their new friends who had helped them get to the top of the mountain. But they wanted to be nice. They wanted to fit in. So the valley people started to learn as much as they could about the ways of the mountain.

"You know," some of the mountain people said after a while, "no one should want to stay down in the valley when they can live up here on the mountain top. Why don't you send us all of your children so we can teach them the ways of the mountain. Then, someday, they will be ready to live here on top of the mountain with us and be accepted. Then, we can all get along."

So the valley people started sending their children to the mountain to learn the ways of the mountain people so they could fit in and be accepted. Not all of the valley children liked this. After a while, some of the valley children began to complain: "Most of the mountain people don't really seem to like us," they said. "Even the ones who say they like us don't like our ways."

"Oh," said the valley parents, "you will get used to it. You must learn the ways of the mountaintop. No one should want to stay down here in the valley all the time."

"But there are some nice things here in the valley, too," some of the valley children complained. "We don't want to give up all our ways just to be on the mountain top. Why can't we stay here in the valley if we want to, at least until we grow up and are strong? Then those of us who want to can go to the mountain top and be proud of who we are instead of begging the mountain people to accept us."

"Just be patient," they were told. "We fought so hard to get to the top of the mountain. We fought so hard."

It wasn't long though before most of the valley children and most of their parents were saying the same thing. They didn't have to spend a lot of time on top of the mountain before they understood that there were some good and some bad things in the valley and there were some good and some bad things on the top of the mountain. But there was a problem.

Some of the valley people who had fought hard to get to the top of the mountain were determined that everyone needed to go there. They didn't want to hear about anyone wanting to stay in the valley. "The valley is not a good place. There is more food on the top of the mountain. There are bigger houses on top of the mountain. They talk a different talk on the top of the mountain, so the mountain talk must be better. They play different games on top of the mountain and they must be more fun. They walk a different walk on top of the mountain. We must be sure our children learn to walk that walk so they can be accepted and then everyone on top of the mountain will like them and they will be accepted on top of the mountain."

The hand full of valley people who didn't like anything about the valley got together with a few of the mountain people who didn't like the valley people's ways but who didn't mind a few of them at a time if they knew how to act. Together, they decided that all of the valley children should come to the mountain and learn the ways of the mountaintop. After a while, this didn't make much sense at all to most of the valley people.

So, it was over the objection of most of the people in the valley, that the valley children were forced to go to the top of the mountain every day to learn the ways of the mountaintop and to prepare for life. But, again, there was a problem. Most of the children from the valley still had to come back to the valley every day.

"They don't give us much credit for what we know," the valley children would say. "They tell us that all the things we have learned down in the valley are only good for the valley. They say that those things are not very important, and they are not very good." This caused a lot of pain and confusion for the valley children. It made them feel bad when they were told that they were not very smart, just knowing valley things. They were told that they were not doing very well in catching up with the mountaintop children. This made them feel bad, too. The valley children were being taught all about the mountain, but they still had to live in the valley. Some of the things they were taught on the mountaintop didn't seem to make much difference where they lived in the valley. More and more, what they learned every day was unconnected from what they did and what they saw every day. More and more, some of the valley children looked for ways to avoid the bad times and the useless things they were learning on the top of the mountain.

When the valley children were in the valley, they had to beware of the valley beasts. The mountain people did not know about the valley beasts. When they were in the valley, the valley children had to know how to cook the valley food. The mountain people did not like the valley food. When they were in the valley, the valley children had to avoid the valley sinking pits. The mountain people did not know about the valley sinking pits. When they were in the valley, the valley children needed to know how to grow the valley fruits. The mountain people did not grow valley fruits on the top of the mountain. The valley children who were trained on the mountaintop were not accepted on the mountaintop and became less and less able to survive in the valley,.

"We have a terrible problem here," the wise people who lived in the valley began to say. "The mountaintop is not preparing our children well for living in the valley or on the mountain. They may never get to climb the mountain on their own if they can't survive the valley beasts, cook the valley food, avoid the sinking pits in the valley and even grow the valley fruits."

A few valley children were tough and got lucky. They survived the valley and some of the eventually went on up to the top of the mountain.. Many more valley children

were not as tough or as lucky. They got eaten alive by the valley beasts or they starved when they couldn't cook the valley food for themselves and their children. Many more sank deep and drowned in the valley sinking pits, and others saw their valley get poorer and poorer as they didn't grow any of the fine fruits that needed to be grown in the valley.

"We cannot be doing the right thing for our children," the wise valley people finally said. "Even if they want to climb the mountain some day on their own, they still have to learn the ways of the valley and learn how to survive in it first. Perhaps some who go to the top of the mountain will bring us new things back to the valley. Perhaps some will grow the mountain top fruits in the rich soil of the valley. Perhaps they can learn the best of the mountaintop and bring it back here to make the valley an even better place. But it was wrong not to recognize the good things that are here in the valley too."

"We can learn the mountain talk, but it is no better than our own valley talk. We could learn the mountain walk, but who wants to walk like that? We need to bring our children home. Then, we can teach them to understand who they are, and where they are from and how to make their homes and families better. Then, they can go to the top of the mountain if they want to, or they can make lush and beautiful homes in the valley. The choice should be theirs."

So, over the objections of those in the valley who hated the valley and those on top of the mountain who hated the valley people's ways, the wise people in the valley began, again, to teach the children in the valley the ways of the valley and the dangers of the valley.

I would like to tell you that they lived happily ever after, but this is a long story and it is not over yet.

-Not Yet The End-



## **A Contribution to the Community Discussion on Education**

August 2, 2002

### Part I

I think I can make a contribution to the national discussion about schools and school reform. What I would like to offer is that we start off that discussion at a different place.

All too often, the discussion on schools starts from the point of what would be good for "public education" as though that institution was an unquestionable virtue of our society and anything that damages it damages us all.

Then there are discussions that begin from the point of "student achievement" as though there was a clear social consensus as to what students, or any one else, for that matter, should achieve. While measurements on "standardized" instruments are bandied about, the fundamental discussion of "What should an educated person know?" is often pushed into the background. Sometimes useful but vague phrases like "every child can learn" or "no child left behind" or "helping children reach their potential" are used. Of course "all children can learn". They do it very well, with no prodding, for years before they come into any school. "Not leaving them behind" is perplexing in that it isn't clear where we are going, and a child's potential can only be looked at in the context of a serious philosophical investigation into the nature and potential of mankind - a discussion most state legislatures and the US congress do not engage as they develop national and state wide school policies.

Another less often heard, but equally problematic starting point is from the interest of teachers, our neighbors who dedicate their lives to the raising of the next generation. Their needs and interests -- sometimes as organized labor and sometimes as dis-respected professionals -- is taken as a beginning of the discussion of which "re-forms" have the most overall efficacy.

I think that the proper starting point is different from all of these and should enlist the whole community in the discussion of parents, children, the community and the future. What are the relationships? What is the potential? What are the dreams? What are the necessities? I believe that all the other questions connected with schooling and education and funding and equity can be grounded in the discussion of parents, children, the community and the future. And more than that, I think that none of these other questions can be looked at very deeply and meaningfully without that grounding.

What I think good parents really want for their children is for them to be able to be meaningfully and respectfully involved as full participants of the community now

and on into the future. I think that the community, those members with children and those without, have a need for the next generation to be prepared to fully assume the responsibilities of the leadership, progress, productivity and continuity of the community. I think children want to live in the present and enjoy themselves as part of the community even as they learn the possibilities and assume the power of adults who they imitate as a natural part of growing up.

The essence of what is needed for these things to take place is the wholesome involvement of young people in the active overall life of the community. From this, young people will learn to do their part much like they learn to talk without ever being instructed, or graded on their progress.

The question for us, then, is what role do the schools, and what we consider "public education" in general, play in this taking place on a full and equitable basis? How can the community as a whole facilitate it taking place? What are we doing right? What are we doing wrong?

There are a number of complicating factors when these discussions are taken up in a non-homogeneous (multi-cultural) community with a history of discrimination. Questions of fairness and equity come to the fore. I once pondered "What is wrong with the son of a banker wanting to be a banker?" What is wrong with a family in the retail business? I think we find it problematic if the daughter of a domestic worker wants to become a maid. I think that we rightly assume that her background serves as a fetter to her full potential and that as a whole community we need to put more resources and more models at her disposal so that her options also include banking or retail or medicine.

Communities within communities have their own aspirations that grow out of the concrete struggles of those communities for dignity freedom and equality. These aspirations are part of what you hear when a black child in the south is told that he needs to get a good education. Part of what is expected is that he learns the skills needed to fit into the larger culture and economy, but it is also desired that he not forget where he comes from and becomes a conscious "credit to his community" and a bridge to help others connect to the larger community. These aspirations to "be somebody" but "don't forget where you came from" are among the highest aspirations of the black community that I know in the south. They are transmitted through the family and also through a number of other religious, and social organizations that form the fabric of daily life. These aspirations were once consciously and explicitly and deliberately espoused in the segregated Negro schools, too. With the rise of massive cross-town bussing and the loss of identity of the black schools that is no longer the case. (Even when the school enrollment is overwhelmingly black, these schools lose the character of the older black schools because they don't have the leadership of the black professional class and black teachers that once populated segregated schools.)

## Part II

There can be no meaningful and fulfilling involvement in the future if that future is itself meaningless, irrational and alienating.

Paul Goodman, one of the founders of an important school of psychotherapy - Gestalt Therapy -- has gone so far as to suggest that some mental illnesses are the selves the response of a creative individual to a repressive or coercive situation.

The only legitimate preparation of young people for this future is to prepare them to fight to change it from what it is toward what it needs to be. The evaluation of education for that future is the extent to which it prepares youth to be critical, analytical, and fearless. Our schools prepare young people to be just the opposite.

Bertrand Russell, one of the great English-speaking philosophers of the 20th century pointed out:

"Certain mental habits are commonly instilled by those who are engaged in educating: obedience and discipline, ruthlessness in the struggle for worldly success, contempt towards opposing groups, and an unquestioning credulity, a passive acceptance of the teacher's wisdom. All these habits are against life. Instead of obedience and discipline, we ought to aim at preserving independence and impulse." (Bertrand Russell *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*)

Paul Goodman is just as harsh in his criticism of what goes on in schools:

"Our entire school system, like our over-organized economy, politics, and standard of living, is largely a trap; it is not designed for the maximum growth and future practical utility of the children into a changing world, that they too will hopefully improve, but is a kind of inept social engineering to mold, and weed out, for short-range extrinsic needs. And even when it is more benevolent, it is in the bureaucratic death-grip, from the universities and the boards of education down, of a uniformity of conception and method that cannot possibly suit the multitude of dispositions and conditions." (Paul Goodman, *From John Dewey to A. S. Neill*)

What this means to me is that adults have a responsibility for trying to make the community a saner, less coercive, less irrational place and in doing so we should enlist the aid of young people in the here and now. Schools, as we know them, work at odds with this task. They are more attuned to preparing young people to fit into the irrationality at some point in the distant future.

John Dewey speaks to this point in his writings:

"I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. . .

I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living." (John Dewey, *Dewey on Education*)

### **Consider a bondsman in the home of a thief.**

A major challenge for progressive folks is to look at the aspirations of parents for their children and see how this fits into the current direction of the country.

In a relatively short period of time, this country has gone from being majority rural, through being overwhelmingly urban and industrial to being post industrial suburban, and service, informational, commercial, financial based. (It is a little hard to figure out the basis for the country these days)

How do we move forward in the future? How should our children be prepared for this existence?

How should we relate to our neighbors around the world?

What should also be added to this description of the basis for the country is that we live in a period of massive "globalization" and in many ways the consolidation of an American Empire where the entire world is being molded to the economic needs and interest of the most powerful in this country.

The role of the military around the world in terms of coercing people world-wide into economic and political relationships beneficial to the most powerful here needs to be looked at in connection to what it means for the future of our youth. Military expenditures and the effect that they have on the overall economy as well as how they are related to the overall division of the social product, cannot be ignored.

The police function and growth of prison/industrial complex required for social control given the wide and growing disparity between the "haves" and the "have-nots" domestically needs to be looked at.

The huge black market economy in drugs - its complex and near complete distortion of the economic realities of American society and the consequent social problems that are connected to them need to be understood.

The loss of jobs in manufacturing and even in commerce and finance due to the increased efficiency of computerized equipment leading to a shrinking base of con-

sumers for a growing number of goods and services need to be analyzed and understood.

The Educational system needs to address all these realities of our community and the future. Is Education best handled by these existing specialized institutions, or is it best taken up as a community based - non-institutional function? The question that needs to be asked is how will we facilitate our young people taking their rightful place of responsibility and leadership in this complex world? Do our schools do that well? Is the reason that they do not do it well simply the lack of money, or would more money allow them mainly to do even better the harm to children that they are doing now?

There was a jingle I heard a lot when I was growing up about "Blue Bonnet Margarine". It went "Everything's better with Blue Bonnet On It". There is a part of the American Myth that sounds a lot like that jingle and is just about as "true": "Everything's Better With More Money On It."

The idea that the ills of education flow from the shortage of funds presupposes that the existing institutions are trying to do the right things but just don't have the resources. Paul Goodman, Everett Reimer, John Holt and Ivan Illich have a different view that Goodman sums up this way:

"When, at a meeting, I offer that perhaps we already have too much formal schooling and that, under present conditions, the more we get the less education we will get, the others look at me oddly and proceed to discuss how to get more money for schools and how to upgrade the schools. I realize suddenly that I am confronting a mass superstition."

### **A note on home schooling**

Home Schooling does not mean replicating the School in the home. It is strongest when it recognizes the natural learning process that takes place for years before school starts and is inhibited rather than enhanced by schooling. It then facilitates the engagement of young people with the real world around them so that they can continue to learn and prepare themselves for leadership. It is best when it recognizes that it is the whole community, not just the home environment that young people must be allowed to come into healthy contact with and learn from.

Fortunately, we have some good examples of this working very well. But first, let's look at and evaluate how the schools are doing in several key areas to the future and the community:

How well do the schools help to build the respect of children for their parents? How well do the schools prepare young people for rebuilding / developing their communities? How well do the schools -even affluent schools - help their students understand the broad social questions and challenges of the future? How well do schools

help their students understand the social and economic contradictions that currently face our nation and the world? How well do the schools prepare people for creative thinking and problem solving "outside the box"? How well do schools prepare the young to be empathetic as well as goal oriented? How well do schools prepare young people to question prevailing wisdom and to challenge authority? How well do schools teach practical survival skills needed for the concrete situations that our young people find themselves in? This would include conflict avoidance , food procurement, emergency shelter, accident avoidance, etc.

"If the object were to make pupils think, rather than to make them accept conclusions, education would be conducted quite differently: there would be less rapidity of instruction and more discussion, more occasions when pupils are encouraged to express themselves, more attempt to make education concern itself with matters in which the pupils feel some interest." (Bertrand Russell, *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*)

We might conclude from this that there are a number of beneficial things that schools could teach our children, but these things are not even a part of the curriculum.

How do we encourage our young people to take up their leadership roles in the community if they are not even encouraged to respect themselves, that community or its other members?

### **Going at it from a different angle**

It would be easy enough to assume that the problem with schools lies with teachers. It could be inferred from the difficulties of students that the teachers are not doing a good enough job. A mild variation on this theme is that there is not enough money for them to do a good job. Either they are said to not be trained well enough, or to have too many students, or too many administrative duties that take them away from teaching or not enough equipment or not enough something.

If on the other hand we proceed from looking at parents, children, the community and the future, we can ask ourselves is what the teachers are hired to do that which really needs to be done? Don't we have a structural problem here rather than a problem with implementation? In fact, isn't the problem that the plan is wrong?

The idea that young people need to be brought into substantial and meaningful contact with the adults who are engaged in the life of the community in such a way that they can be inspired by them and learn from them is not at the heart of the mission of the schools. Rather, schools seek to develop a "curriculum" which is intended as a "one size fits all" stamp to imprint future behavior and knowledge on young people.

From the standpoint of the real interests of parents and most of the community for the future and development of children, it isn't working. From the standpoint of the continuity of the community structures and community life as we know it, it is

working very well. That is because the schools do a stellar job of sorting out children into "winners and losers" and helping them to understand that their station in life is ultimately their fault.

The powers that be need more folks in fast food than in engineering, and that is what we get. They need more in janitorial services than in medicine. They need more in jail than in college, They need more in black market drug sales than in capital goods manufacturing. And of course, these forces get what they need from their schools. This is part of the source of the society's overall success as the most powerful country in the world.

For those who feel excluded from that power, there is a dilemma. Should they insist on finding room inside the existing paradigm for their child, or should they "rock the boat" and insist that the entire structure is not healthy in the long term and over all sense?

More and more there are fundamental problems being raised with the direction of our community into the future. Many parents who have these questions are not at all clear how they should be resolved relative to their children. While general critiques of the social structure can be made, what about Shuquesha's, Shanikwa's and Jardell's future?

Ultimately, it will have to be Shuquesha, Shanekwa and Jardell who will decide that future. There is no amount of coercion that will reliably force them into any one particular mold. The greatest hope for them to either engage in this society fully as it is, or to come to understand the need to transform it, is engaging them into a non-abstract process of social involvement rather than isolating them from the community and spoon-feeding them "curriculum".

## Fourth of July Poem

*Friday, June 27, 2003*

I probably won't celebrate the 4th of July this year.

I mean I won't really celebrate it.

I may go downtown and listen to bands

Or maybe even play in one,

Or I might go to a fire works show

And listen to the children's "ooh"s and "aah"s,

As they watch the skies light up

And hear the report from the celebrating cannons and mortars

Imitating war, while celebrating Pax Americana.

But I won't celebrate the 4th of July

Because there is nothing there for me to celebrate.

Most of my folks were slaves

When those fancy pieces of paper were being signed

With even fancier handwriting,

Declaring that all men were created equal --

Endowed, as it were, by their Almighty Creator

With certain inalienable rights --

Rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But my folks were slaves.

They didn't mean us --

They couldn't have meant us.

They owned us like cattle.

They counted us like bales of cotton.

At most, two-thirds a man, by the book,

And then only to see how many white men

Would sit to represent the region

Where we had no rights,

To life or

To liberty

And the only happiness we could pursue was

Dreaming about running away

And trying to find the rest of our family

Who had been sold down the river.

I said most of my folks were slaves

'Cause some of my folks

Were slaveholders, seducers and rapists.



I don't much feel like celebrating them  
Or what they were celebrating, either.  
I don't claim them.  
But they were there.  
You can see them today  
In the yellow skin of my brother and  
sister.  
You can hear them today  
In our "family" name  
And in the inflexions of our speech.  
You can sense them today  
In the stiffness of my walk,  
In my introspection,  
In my wariness,  
And in my anger.  
They haven't said "We are sorry."  
They haven't said "We were wrong."  
They haven't said "We owe you for  
what you did."  
They haven't said "We owe you for  
what we did."  
Their children go on acting like noth-  
ing happened.  
As though, through rape, we are not  
all cousins now.

As though it was all only our fault.  
As though we ought to be ashamed.  
As though there is more shame in be-  
ing forced to be a slave --  
A sign of weakness  
Than choosing to be a slave master --  
A sign of immorality.  
As though we ought to be grateful  
For having been "civilized"  
And for getting religion.  
As though their god and the blessings  
of their civilization  
Could ever repay us  
For the brutality,  
For the indignity,  
For the humiliation,  
For the destitution,  
For the despair,  
And for the destruction  
Of our gods and civilization  
That they hoped we would forget  
When they took away our drums.  
Their children go on accepting their  
privilege  
Acting like we are begging for favors

For special treatment,  
For undeserved preference,  
For sympathy --  
Affirming through action, our inferiority.  
Their children spread that same arrogance around the world  
With a made-up-myth about being from a nation conceived in liberty  
Conveniently leaving out the genocide and the slavery,  
Conveniently forgetting the "trail of tears"  
And the tears that trailed from the lash and the chains.  
They ask of their modern day victims:  
"Why do they hate us".  
Why wouldn't they "hate us" if they  
Are not deluded by the phony legends  
And see instead the devastation  
Still wreaked by this haughty greed.  
The white children of the slave holders and the seducers and the rapists  
Along with their guests and friends  
Will be celebrating the 4th of July.  
They will celebrate a freedom that many others of us still don't know.

They will celebrate their victories in wars where we had nothing to win.  
And in the civil war the only war that did make a difference,  
They celebrate the reconciliation and not the victory.  
They celebrate the deal that healed their nation  
While tearing the flesh and ripping gaping, oozing wounds in my people.  
While we're still waiting for our 40 acres and a mule.  
I won't be celebrating the 4th of July this year.  
For me there is nothing to celebrate.

## Education and Community

March 9, 1999

These are some educational principles based on African traditional education that I have found and updated to our context:

- \* *Education is not limited to school.*
- \* *Children learn all the time.*
- \* *Everyone is an educator. Children learn from all that they see and hear and from everyone they are around.*
- \* *Education should be linked to the reality of the environment. (Environmentally conscious.)*
- \* *Education should be linked to the reality of the community. (Socially conscious.)*
- \* *Education should be linked to productive work. (Economically conscious.)*
- \* *Education should foster sense of community identity and responsibility.*
- \* *The whole community has a responsibility to be concerned about all the children's education.*
- \* *A good society is in balance.*
- \* *Science and mathematics plays a key role.*
- \* *Spiritual matters are important must be respected in all aspects of life.*
- \* *Parents play a particularly important role in the education of their children.*
- \* *Children should be taught to respect and appreciate their elders.*
- \* *Culture should be respected and advanced.*
- \* *Reading and writing are fundamental.*

Long before there were schools, there were always processes by which young people, in their transition from childhood to adulthood, came to know what was required of them (their responsibilities) and came to be armed with the information and skills to discharge those requirements. We can think of the educational process in its most general terms, as the immersion in one's culture - real culture, not the static, sometimes mummified culture we put on display in museums and on stages, but the dynamic day to day culture of existence. Humans are not born knowing very much. While young horses can stand and even run within hours of their birth, humans develop much more slowly and are armed with far fewer instincts to help assure our survival. We have to learn almost everything. We require long periods of adult guidance, support and protection to acquire the necessary intellectual and physical tools to be self sustaining and productive.

The educational process is necessarily intergenerational. That is, it involves one generation interacting with another and passing along its experiences and knowledge and in a sense, its spirit, to another. There was a time when everyone was naturally involved. To learn how to do something, you worked beside and took instructions from

someone who did it. You learned how to sow and cultivate from someone who was farming. You learned how to hunt from a hunter. You learned shoe making from a shoemaker. You learned what it meant to be a member of the community from the community members all around you.

The advent of schools as separate institutions took these intergenerational processes out of the hands of the whole community and placed them in the hands of specialists whose job was teaching school. The arena for education moved from the whole community into the schoolhouse. This came about as society became more and more specialized and fragmented. The social division of labor must have seemed to require it. We can lament the fact that this took place but it remains a fact. It tends to explain some of the social and economic problems that our society has. Those who would be shoemakers are taught by those who have never made a shoe. We wonder why some young people find it so difficult to fit into their communities in a healthy and wholesome way when they are instructed in civics by those who hold their communities in contempt, and who are not familiar with its realities. More and more, most adults feel alienated from the process of the education of children. We have accepted too limited a role because we are not the experts, the educators, the teachers and the school administrators. This leaves education barren and often abstract - disconnected from life and community, and not serving the children well in their transition to adulthood.

It is easy to see why community control of education is so important. It helps to minimize the distance that "schooling as a specialty" has created between the realities of our children's communities and the education that must prepare them for their futures.

This is not to say that there are no good teachers. This is not to say that there are no special skills required for teaching children. It is to say that what we are trying to do with education inside the specialized institutions that are schools can and historically has been taken care of inside the functioning community as a whole. Moreover, if we want to increase the relevance of educational institutions, we need to reintegrate adults who are not school specialists, but rather who specialize in other areas, back into the process.

Before there were schools, the preparation for adulthood must have very naturally included information about maturity, and the process of maturing. Rites of passage for young men and young women existed under the supervision of the community. Now days, there is an informal mix of activities that replaces these rites of passage. It includes informal sex education talks on the street corners, activities and training in church and Sunday school, summer camp, informal discussion in the home, with parents, with siblings - all these things make up aspects of the education that young people receive. Why, though, are we not satisfied with the small part of this overall process that takes place in formal educational institutions? Because, for far too many of our young people, the things that they get outside of school are insufficient, and what they get inside school contradicts rather than adds to their overall preparation

for productive involvement in society as adults. This includes an understanding of their role in the society and responsibility to improve that society.

There is a certain curiosity and excitement about learning that is natural in young people. Although humans don't seem to have many instincts, the drive to explore and to learn and to understand seems to be "hard wired" and almost universal. Even for babies, learning is its own reward. The tragedy is that send our children to schools that can destroy this curiosity and natural love for knowledge and learning in our young people by the time they are in the third or fourth grade.

Children in our society often end up isolated and divorced from the very things that make up the world they live in. They have no knowledge of how most of the things they use work. They have no idea where the things that they use and consume come from. They have no idea who makes the decisions that determine the quality and character of their lives. They have no idea who makes the things that they are surrounded by. As a result, everything is *hokus spokus*. And a young person's ability to decide what he wants to make of his life, or to put it in different terms, his ability to decide where he should fit in this mysterious scheme of adult activity that actually defines the world he lives in is near zero. All too often, all he can model himself after are those adults who do enter into his world with whatever limited power and involvement they have in it. Is it a wonder then that our young people often fall so far short of their potential? They have no idea what they want to do because they have so little exposure to people doing things and the inner workings of what is done.

Seldom are young people given the opportunity to be excited about anything. Many youth have never been around adults who are excited about what they do. Certainly this is true of far too many school classrooms. Who remembers an elementary math or science teacher who seemed genuinely excited about the wonders of science and consistency of mathematics? All too often these subjects are presented as discrete facts to be memorized, rather than consistent systems to be discovered and understood. One approaches such knowledge from the standpoint of failure: at best, your grasp of other people's discoveries will be less than theirs, and you are not armed with the tools or charged with the task of making discoveries of your own.

We need to establish a process to get adults who are enthusiastic about something to share that excitement with some young people on a regular basis. In many ways, it does not even matter what particular thing it is. Those adults who are really into gardening should do some gardening with some youthful apprentices. Those who take pictures should get some young people doing it with them. Those who sew, or bake or build furniture or build model rocket or sing or design things, or whatever, should make sure that the next generation knows about those things and the pleasure and thrill that can come along with them.

A model curriculum for a school that wanted to make use of some of the principles outlined here would include classes along the following themes:

- \* How does it work? (Science and Math) -- use cell phones and pagers to teach math and physics
- \* Who makes it? (Careers) expose kids to manufacturing careers
- \* How is it made? (Manufacturing technology)
- \* Who decides it? (Civics) expose young people to the decision making processes as they affect them
- \* What happened and what difference did it make? (History, History of Science)
- \* How did they feel? (Sociology, Psychology, History, Literature)
- \* What did they do? (History)
- \* How do things develop? (Philosophy, History, Science)
- \* Where did it happen? (Geography, world history)
- \* What is fair in this situation? (Law, Sociology, Civics, Philosophy)
- \* How can I express myself and what is truly beautiful? (Writing, Art, Music)
- \* How do I know what is true? (Philosophy, Science, History) Etc.

We need to be able to answer questions that young people ask us about the world and about what they are learning. Schooling does not always need to be abstract. How many young math students shut down in geometry class when they don't get a serious answer to "Why would anyone want to know this?" We should have a good answer that question or get the material out of the syllabus.

## **Speech Delivered at the 30th Anniversary Commemoration of the 1969 Takeover of Cornell University Willard Straight Hall**

*April 19, 1999*

It is with a great deal of humility that I am here today. I would like to thank all the groups and individuals who were responsible for inviting me. This is important to me. Much of my life has been defined by these events we are here to day to commemorate.

With a great deal of humility, I would like to thank a lot of people who can not be here today: John Garner, Robert Rone and Larry Dickson. These three brothers were leaders in the Afro-American Society in 1969 and an inspiration to many of us here. While they have all passed away, they will not be forgotten.

There are others who cannot be here today who never came to Cornell, but who are a part of what our struggle here has been about. I include Mumia Abu Jamaal, Amadou Diallo, Kwame Cannon and others unjustly imprisoned or murdered by this repressive and racist system. (Kwame Cannon is the 30 year old son of Willena Cannon who was a member of the organization that was massacred by the Ku Klux Klan in Greensboro, NC in November of 1979. His mother and others successfully sued the City of Greensboro and the Police Department for their complicity in the wrongful death of their associate s. Since the court system could not get to Willena Cannon, they got to her son. This young Black man was sentenced to 3 life sentences for a series of non-violent burglaries he committed while he was 17 years old crimes that would have gotten others a slap on the wrist. These crimes had been committed while his mother was "black-listed" for her political activity and could not find adequate work to buy him some of the things he wanted. It took about five years of consistent struggle led by Black ministers and community activists that drew in the Mayor of Greensboro, a sitting US congressman, a former State Supreme Court Chief Justice, and thousands of ordinary citizens writing letters and asking the governor to commute this outlandish sentence. After 13 years in prison, Kwame Cannon was finally released March 31 of this year.)

My remarks tonight are necessarily narrow. I don't know very much. None of us do. When what we know is held up against all the knowledge that is known, our knowledge is very small indeed. So much new mathematics is written and published each month, for instance, that it would be impossible for any single individual to keep up with it all. The same is true for other disciplines. No one knows very much. Who here can speak Urdu? What about Amharic? Who knows the funerary rituals of the mountain people of the Cameroon? If you lived there it would be very important for you to know. So both for the depth of it, and for the breadth of it, none of us know very much of all that is known. Knowing a lot, then cannot be what it means to be educated.

So much is known, yet we can only know so much.

We need to have an understanding then, of what things we should know. What constitutes the knowledge of an educated person? What we need to understand very well is our community, our neighborhood, our place in the world. We need to know our particular environment. We really need to understand in some depth how we fit into the world and how to deal with what is around us. We need to engage our environment, and survive in it if we are to ever move on to transform it, or transcend it, or even transfer out of it. The first thing we have to know is how to survive in it.

We also need to understand that this dynamic, interactive and responsive "soup" that is the environment in which we find ourselves, is self-replicating. Every day, every year within the limits of the mutations that take place, it reproduces itself and everything that is in it. If we got rid of every criminal in the country today, and did nothing else, we would produce more tomorrow. If every drug addict suddenly dropped dead, we would create new ones to take their place. We are constantly engaged in reproducing out of this "soup" every thing that is in it. And we know much too little of the process of that reproduction. We don't understand much at all of the "social DNA" that contains the essential elements of "genetic code" for this self replication that takes place without our conscious intervention and sometimes even without our knowledge. We don't know very much. And there is so much we need to know.

I say that to lead us back to what we were struggling for here at Cornell in 1969. We wanted a relevant education. We wanted to understand the communities that we had come from well enough to be able to creatively engage them and in engaging them to transform them and transcend them. We understood that even if we wanted to build bridges out of those communities, bridges across lines of class, of race and of gender understanding, the bridges had to have foundations that were strong and deeply anchored in the community or else they would collapse when others tried to follow us on the way out.

If our education at Cornell was to have any real meaning, any real relevance, any real significance, it needed to be an education that was rooted in its connection to our communities and the struggle of the people there to survive, to transform and to transcend those communities.

I said that my remarks were narrow because I am talking mainly about African American students and the African American Community. While I recognize that some of what I say will be applicable and adaptable other people and situations, I want to say that I think it is alright to be specific and to be concrete.

Why is it that we are here tonight narrowly talking about the understanding of one group of people when in fact, we live in a global village? Air travel, the Internet, and satellite communication have all shortened the time and in effect, the distance between people. But even in a global village, it is OK to develop your own hut. No one



else will develop your hut for you. No one else should develop your hut for you. And, in fact, no one else can develop your hut for you. You are responsible for developing your own hut, yourself. If you don't do it, it doesn't get done. If it is not done, it is not only we who live in the hut who are hurt, but along with us, the entire global village is diminished because we have brought nothing to contribute to it.

Being invited to visit other huts is fine. Being offered a chance to admire and gain from the development of other huts is fine, but we mustn't always go into other huts empty handed because we haven't been productive in developing the resources in our hut. We need to develop our hut to be able to bring something with us when we go into the other huts, or the entire global village suffers.

As an aside, I am involved a lot with public school education issues. My friends in the NAACP always rush to point out that separate schools are inherently unequal every time some of us raise the need to maintain and control some educational institutions in our community. It is good that they have memorized this phrase from the historic 1954 Brown v. Board case, but it doesn't really tell us very much. From the way they use the term "segregated" to mean any place there are not enough white people, most of us could be said to be from "segregated" families. Are separate families inherently unequal? Many of us attend churches in our community that are overwhelmingly black or even all black. Would anyone want to argue that these churches are segregated and as separate institutions inherently unequal? Even if you look at the question of resources, Black churches and families obviously don't have as many material resources as white churches and families. Does that even make them inherently unequal? Do these institutions promote separatism and prevent the people who are a part of them from ever going out into the world and interacting with others on an equal footing? Obviously not. That cannot be what it means that "separate is inherently unequal." But I still don't understand what these assimilationists do actually mean with their talk about the inherent inequity of institutions we build.

So, in spite of what some people say, I still say, we have to develop our hut. That does not mean that we hate the other people in the other huts. But, we have to develop our hut. That does not mean that we will never have anything to do with the other people and the things they do in their huts. It doesn't mean that we cannot or should not learn from other huts. What it does mean is that if we are to have a truly global village where we all contribute on the basis of equality, we have to develop our hut ourselves.

Much is said when discussing the public schools about the achievement gap in public education. What some people don't understand is that the gap gets wider as the years of public school attendance increase. If all those early intervention advocates were right, and if the problem stemmed from all the things the children didn't get in those years before they started school, then going to school should narrow the gap rather than allow it to widen. No, the problem is not what the children did not learn before they entered school, the problem is with the "relevance gap", where every year what

is taught in school is further and further away from what young people see in their communities and need to be able to understand. What they are taught everyday is further and further away from what they sense that they need to survive and to transform and transcend their communities. Young people, even babies have a natural curiosity, a natural desire to explore and question and learn everything they can. The public schools have found a way to strip that curiosity and craving for knowledge from school children by the time they are in the third or fourth grade. This is from the "relevance gap" widening. If we can see that gap widening in the public schools, think of how wide it is by the time we reach the university level.

That is what we were dealing with here at Cornell 30 years ago. We looked around us at the country and the communities we were from. There was the war in Vietnam. There were the hundred cities that had urban rebellions after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. There were the Black students at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, SC that had been shot and killed the year before while trying to integrate a bowling alley. There were the hundreds of communities that we had come from where unemployment was too high, where underemployment was the rule, where education was inadequate where housing was substandard and where the quality of life of our people was not what it needed to be. We wanted an education that spoke to that reality. We wanted to be better equipped to survive that reality and also to understand that reality well enough to transform it and transcend it and help others build bridges out of it. That was what a relevant education was to many of us.

We didn't really understand or appreciate Cornell's reluctance to help us develop such a program of study. Ezra Cornell had said "I would build an institution where any person can gain instruction in any subject." So the questions that kept being raised about the "academic legitimacy" of Black Studies were answered as far as we were concerned. Perhaps, there was a hidden view that the only thing that had "academic legitimacy" was the maintenance of the status quo. We did not appreciate why a group of people who had had many years to construct relevant educational programs for us, but who had not done so, were suddenly so concerned that they would tell us what we "really" wanted and place limits on what we could get. There were many meetings, and many discussions and supplications before the many protests that took place over the winter and spring of 1968 and 1969.

By the time we reach the University, we have done a lot of surviving. Whether by our wits, or by our good fortune, by the time we reach the University, we have made it a lot further than many of our brothers and sisters ever make it.

Those who don't make it end up making up the prison population, the prostitutes, the drug addicts and dealers, the street gangs. Some others of us go too early to populate the cemeteries where the dreams and the potential of too many of our young people are buried along with their broken bodies. It was for those who were left behind, who did not survive, that we fought for the type of independent Black Studies that could speak to the environment we were from, to the real conditions in our communities and help to inform us so we could help to lead the struggle for a better life. It was in

memory of some, in honor of others and as the only remaining hope of others yet, that we needed our presence at Cornell to be connected to our community's survival, transformation and prosperity.

Recently, I wrote a children's story "On the Mountaintop Preparation for Living Down in the Valley." The sense of part of the story was " It's OK for a few of you can come up here, if you don't bring those "valley ways" up here with you." But the other problem was that learning on the mountaintop does not prepare you adequately for surviving down in the valley with the "valley beasts" and the "valley sinking pits". The learning on the mountaintop will not teach you how to grow the special fruit that only grows in the valley. Learning mountain talk and the silly looking mountain walk, won't help you communicate and get around in the valley. When we take the children from the valley, and teach them only about the mountaintop, we prepare them only for failure.

At some point, I would like for us to have time to talk about what constitutes a good education, both as it relates to the public schools and as it relates to the University. Our view 30 years ago was that we had a right to that good education, and that we were determined to make this university live up to the words of Ezra Cornell.

There are many questions that remain to be answered. There are questions of community development and of economic development as it affects our community. There are problems with police repression and injustices in the criminal justice system. There are problems with the public schools that are now crippling more of our children than they are educating. There are many needs that are not adequately being met. There is still far too much suffering. There is too much despair. The struggle for a relevant education has to be coupled with an ongoing struggle to keep it real and keep it connected to the community. We continue to have a need for a relevant education to help us get some things straight in our hut.

Again, I say to you very humbly, there is so much we need to know. There are so many people who need us.

Thank you for your attention.

**BEYOND THE  
SPECTACLE**



**THE WILLARD STRAIGHT  
TAKEOVER | 1969 -1999**

## **We Who God has Blessed with Locks**

***June 24, 2002***

Coming home from buying some books and music, I saw a man standing at an intersection with a sign. It read:

- \* I'm on the road,
- \* I'm broke,
- \* I'm hungry,
- \* Please help me.
- \* God bless you.

By the agility with which he moved from one place to another, making the best advantage of sign placement regarding traffic flow, he did not seem to particularly need help. I remembered the stories of people who had found that “Will Work For Food” signs got them more money than either food or work and sometimes much more money than many of us who are working. It gets easier and easier to dismiss beggars, panhandlers or whatever we may call them: They don't want to work. They think someone owes them something. Why should those of us who work take from our labors to pay them to stand there and beg?”

I thought again about his sign. Maybe I had misread it. Perhaps it had said, “...Please help me – God has blessed you.” Perhaps what he really meant was “Look, some of you are benefiting every day from this messed up system that isn't helping me right now at all. God has blessed you to have some things that you need to share.”

If that doesn't make any sense to you, then consider this: Not one drop of the water that is being sold daily was either designed or made by any of the people or groups who sell it. The basic design of the fruit, the live-stock animals, the vegetables were all here and for free. No one made a square inch of the land that farmers and ranchers use or that the factories are built on. No one put a drop of oil or a pound of coal or uranium into the ground.

We did build some fences, though. We made some doors where we could lock up the food and provide it conditionally through sale or special favors. We built more fences and staked claims to pieces of land, protecting them with guns and explosives. We kept other folks locked out of what we claimed to be ours and “developed” it for our own benefit. Some of us have benefited from these locks. God has blessed us. Others have not benefited. This guy was only asking that those who have benefited – who God has blessed – help him out since he was having a hard time and since he has a right to a part of the bounty too.

Maybe his request isn't nearly as unreasonable as many would think it to be.

# **On the Concentration of Students with Low Socio-Economic Status in Neighborhood Schools**

## ***A Liberation Perspective***

3/25/99

Perhaps the best argument to be made against neighborhood schools is that neighborhood schools will lead to a concentration of students with low SES (Socio-Economic-Status) in some schools. It is then said that this would cause a downward spiral of negative peer pressure, low expectations, and poor performance. This, it is suggested, should be remedied by establishing and maintaining school diversity goals that will prevent such concentrations with all the unhealthy effect that these concentrations would have on the culture of a school. Through this argument, the "it's not just race" position is made alongside the position stemming from the Brown decision that "separate schools are inherently unequal".

Two things need to be looked at. First, what is the experience of these same low SES students when they are disbursed throughout the school system by some process of racial and/or SES balance, and second, what would be the most appropriate setting and treatment of these children.

I would contend that when low SES students are distributed throughout the schools, there is no substantially better outcome for them as individuals. That is to say, if we concentrate the data on the children, rather than concentrate the children, we would see the same grim results that can be observed if the children are placed together. The difference, which is somehow more socially tolerable, is that we can hide this performance and these children better if they are spread around. These are the children who, even in a mixed setting, have the highest dropout rates, the highest suspension rates, the highest retention rates, the lowest grades, the worst attitudes about school, about society, about each other and about themselves. When they are spread out, there is just a little of this negativity in a lot of places and it becomes a self-curing problem because many of these children drop out of school as soon as they can and the statistics of the institutions they leave improve. While there may be some positive peer pressure from being around middle and upper class children, there is also an effect of feeling different and isolated, and needing to act out in order to gain any attention and assert one's individuality. Much of the latter will offset the former. We need to be honest with ourselves about the fact that by and large we are compounding and hiding the problem.

The character of the educational activity that goes on when this group of low SES children are concentrated in a school by virtue of the fact that they live in communities that might be served by the same school should also be examined. Often, the cur-

riculum does not properly match the needs of the children in the context of their community. If we are trying to force-feed children information that does not matter to them, then it is no wonder that they reject it rather than engage it fully. We need to do more work in developing the curriculum that integrates a concern for education with a concern for social justice. Such a curriculum would address the reality of race and economics by looking at discrimination and poverty. Such a curriculum should be real to the students who study it, because it should address the questions:

- \* Who am I?
- \* Why is my community like it is?
- \* What is possible for me?
- \* What is possible for my community?
- \* How can I change things for myself as an individual?
- \* How can I change things for my community?

If this is not the basic characteristic of what we are teaching these children, we need to ask ourselves why should they be interested in it. If this is what we are teaching, then what would be the problem with the concentration of children for whom these questions are relevant? Would it not be possible in relatively small and intense settings to generate the type of discussion around these things that get into the depths of philosophic, historical, literary, scientific, aesthetic and moral questions that form the core of a solid education? I think so. When our low SES students are so engaged and on this basis prepare themselves to engage in their own and their community's liberation and advancement, then they will be good subjects for engaging with others as equals. As this happens we will have some real dialogue and understanding about race, economics and justice.

The obvious question is: Can we reasonably expect that this is the type of education that our children will receive if they are in neighborhood schools organized by the school system? The sad answer is, probably not. Those of us who care need to develop a clearer notion of what our children need to be learning based on the notion that education should enable a child to deal with his environment. Dealing with your environment means both learning to survive within it, and also learning how to improve it, or better yet, transform it and in our case, liberate it. What we have in the current curriculum for low SES students whether they are concentrated or spread out is a block of subject matter that ignores their real environment and by extension, it avoids them. This again is a source of alienation that much of the discussion of school reform does not even attempt to address.

The "more money" strategies to fund early intervention, and other "gap closing" programs are limited to dealing with individual students without addressing the question

of the relations of those students to their communities. These strategies could only work if the children pretend that their reality is not real and simply try to escape. Some individuals have, and others will continue to be able to do just that, but that fact should not cause us to develop an educational strategy that requires such an abnormal and rare act. After learning the capital of Vermont, talking about Woodrow Wilson and practicing calculating ratios and proportions, the children still go home to their impoverished lives in their sub-standard homes and watch the black-market drug economy provide most of the employment in their neighborhood. It is no wonder that the educational gap grows wider as our young people mature. What we teach them and what they see grow wider and wider apart.

### **We need to establish schools with a Liberation Agenda.**

We need to train teachers to go into existing institutions as subversives to overthrow the irrelevant processes and develop relevant ones. We need to support those teachers as they come in conflict with the school administrators. We need to embrace our children and show them a hope that grows from their circumstances rather than simply ignoring them. We need our community and concerned citizens to come together to develop the resources to make this happen. It will be a big task, but the results will be well worth it.



## Childhood Clarity and anti-Semitism

3/14/2003

Being born in 1949 and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, I know more about prejudice than I ever wanted to know. I remember, as a child, thinking how much easier it would be to be a white racist who could simply hate all black people than it was to be a young black person interested in progress and having to evaluate white folks individually, on the basis of their merit. That difference brings me to some thoughts on some literature being distributed recently here in Greensboro and most likely other places. On the surface the literature seems to oppose the war in Iraq - something very dear to me, but in doing so raises up some very vicious anti-Semitism -- something for which I have no tolerance.

The flyer, put out in a few white Greensboro neighborhoods by a group of neo-Nazis calling themselves "The Creativity Movement", argues that the pending war with Iraq is Israel's war and that it should be left to the "cowardly Jews" who want us to be their "cannon fodder".

The flyer is not a reasoned critique of why a US attack on Iraq would be wrong nor is it even a criticism or serious analysis of the situation in Israel and the Palestinian territories. It is a broadside attack on Jews. It is that thing that even as a child I thought was easy and wrong.

The problem with anti-Semitism is that like all other forms of racism, it doesn't make any sense. It lumps things together that should be separate and it separates things and people that should be together. It puts together Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu, on the one hand, for all their real and planned crimes against the Palestinian people with no less Jewish people like long time Israeli peace advocate Uri Avnery and my friend from Hillsboro, Andy Silver. Andy is an Israeli citizen who left Israel in the mid 80s out of conscience and recently organized nationally the "Jews for Cynthia McKinney" to raise money for her congressional campaign and who is an active and outspoken advocate for peace and justice and the rights of the Palestinian people. Anti-Semitism lumps together the virulently racist American Jewish organization, The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) which has engaged in attacks on African American leadership as well as opposition within Jewish circles and in Israel itself to its blind support for Israeli policy on the one hand with groups like Gush Shalom, "the hard core of the Israeli peace movement" and B'Tselem "The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories". These are organizations that are very critical of current Israeli policy, oppose and expose human rights abuses and which oppose the occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Jewish people like people of all other groups come in all shapes sizes orientations, ideologies and attitudes. Certainly not all of my Jewish friends agree with my posi-

tion on the importance of ending the occupation of Palestinian territories and some who don't know me very well have even accused me of being anti-Semitic for having an opinion on the issue at all. I have no problem feeling that we as Americans have a responsibility to oppose our government's injustices and its support for the injustice perpetrated by other governments. The \$5 Billion or so that currently goes to support Israel's current policy is something that we in the USA need to be talking to our representatives in Washington about. But this trash from "The Creativity Movement" is something else all together. It is not about Israel or Israeli policy. It is not about Iraq or US policy there. It is a filthy piece spewing hatred for Jews.

While I was born black in the south, I will stand with people anywhere in the world against oppression and feel at one with them. I have been a South African opposing apartheid. I will tell you now that I am a Palestinian in the occupied territories, I am an Iraqi, anxious about US war plans, I am an Afghan longing for peace and an end to foreign entanglements, and today, with this literature being distributed here in Greensboro, I am a Greensboro Jew. Like war, racism, colonial occupations and empire building, anti-Semitism is wrong and I knew it, even as a child.

## **Black Understanding of the US Lynch Mob**

*November 8, 2001*

There is something in the mentality of black folks in the USA that is connected to our history in these lands. It is the memory burned into our collective consciousness of the terror of lynch mobs, race riots, and mob violence. We remember Tulsa, Oklahoma; Rosewood, Florida; Atlanta, Georgia 1906; Chicago, Illinois 1919; Elaine, Arkansas and too many other times and places to list.

As I write these lines, the best armed and most sophisticated lynch mob in history is bringing panic, death and destruction to innocent people in Afghanistan. It is a lynch mob organized, equipped and backed by the most powerful killing machinery in the world. Some parts of its work are being carried out from the sanitary heights of nearly ten miles up as B-52's conduct their carpet bombing of the Afghan cities and countryside. Other parts are conducted at closer range with AC130 gunships flying slow, low and loud with high-speed, high-power machine guns and cannons that are designed as much to intimidate and cause panic as to tear apart whatever targets they are aimed at. Then the Special Forces move in quickly and stealthily on the ground. They are heavily armed and trained to kill everyone they see -- men, women and children -- to guarantee the success of their operations.

The target is Osama bin Laden and his organization Al Qaeda, ("the base") along with the Afghan Taliban government that has been "indicted" for harboring these terrorists and supporting their activities. No public evidence has even been suggested that would point to the guilt of the peoples of Afghanistan in any of the atrocities that took place September 11. It is the people of Afghanistan who must withstand the brunt of this attack. The public evidence even against Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda has been highly circumstantial. US government spokespeople have said that they have in-depth and convincing evidence, but that it must remain secret to protect US intelligence gathering methods. Such an idea sets a dangerous precedent indeed. The exact same argument can be made with no modification about the evidence gathered for any criminal proceeding. The possibility of exposing criminal investigation techniques is always there. As the draconian PATRIOT act continues to unfold in practice, we should look out for additional attacks on our hard won civil liberties.

But, in any case, the question of evidence is always secondary to a lynch mob. Its real purpose is not to bring the guilty parties to justice, but rather to put whole populations in their place through violence, fear and intimidation while advancing other, more fundamental, agendas. The mob's logic is simple: Someone's guilt is declared. The lack of need of any judicial procedure is asserted. Then the call is made for a summary execution. "We know he did it. Ain't no need wasting no time on no trial. Let's string 'em up!" This allows the mob action to go forward without the complexity of having to stop, think and examine any facts. We black folks know about that process. That would have to explain part of why there is a difference in the level of support between black and white US residents for Bush's military policies in the a f-

termath of September 11. We know what it feels like to be sitting inside, knowing that all that is going on outside is madness and that at any moment, the madness can come to the door with the demand to give up one of our loved ones to satisfy some vigilante's bloodlust.

I remember it from Little Rock, Arkansas, where I was an 8-year-old child in September of 1957. White lynch mobs there took to the streets to prevent the integration of a public high school, which I ended up graduating from ten years later. I was only 8 at the time, so I don't remember the details except from reading it in histories, but I still remember the fear.

The Afghan families who are watching their homes destroyed, their communities leveled and their children torn apart by bombs, cluster bombs, artillery and land mines know, too, what I am talking about. Some have attempted to flee. Others have had to calculate if they had enough food and water or a reliable means of transportation, or health and energy enough to walk the distance to the border. Others have realized or found the borders to be closed -- the only option found to be no option at all. And, so, with everything disrupted, people who are not directly hit by the bombs are beginning to die of starvation and disease. These Afghans must have to ask themselves: "Why are they bombing us? Why are they maiming our children? Why are they killing our relatives? We know nothing of New York. We know nothing of Washington DC. We have never been on an airplane. We don't control Al Qaeda. We don't know except from your news bin Laden. We are pained enough by the actions of our own government. We must try to moderate them." But, the vigilante mob violence goes on. Here in the US, the media trot out a daily news diet of the inhumanity of the Taliban. Some of what is shown must certainly be accurate. This band of religious extremists have control over the country and rule with the harsh hand of ancient tribal law. Prostitutes are executed in public arenas at the same time thieves are hung from the goal posts. Women are beaten on the street for not wearing veils or wearing the wrong color shoes or high heels. They have banned the Internet. Free speech is severely limited. Freedom of religion is unheard of. The education of women is outlawed. This is not a "nice" regime. We need to remember at the same time, that if the US were judged solely by what is wrong or extreme within its borders a somewhat distorted but profoundly disturbing view of it could be portrayed.

As one of the few countries in the world that allows the execution of children, as the place where police officers shoot and kill unarmed people who are only accused of traffic violations; as the place where an unarmed immigrant street vendor is shot at 41 times and hit 19 while reaching for his wallet; as the place where mentally ill people are shot and killed on the street when they need assistance; as the place where poor people are turned out into the cold if they don't have the proper credentials for emergency night shelters; as the place where children are forced into educational institutions that are so mean and so frustrating for some of them that they turn to killing their classmates before taking their own lives, we could paint a true picture of the USA that looks as bad as what we see of the Taliban. Looks can be deceiving. No brief description of any government or culture can capture the richness and comple x-

ity of what is there. These things must ultimately be judged and corrected by the people themselves. But this approach to the Taliban is useful in making them seem so evil that whatever violence the US does to them is justified while the real, unspoken agenda is advanced and we the people of the US are smugly assured of our own righteousness.

We have a need to understand and expose this real agenda behind the mob or we are complicit in it. We need to know if it is indeed the case that the plans for an invasion of Afghanistan were prepared well before September 11, 2001. We need to understand fully the connections to US oil companies' need for an oil pipeline across Afghanistan bringing newly found oil from the Caspian Sea. This pipeline would only be viable if the US has control of a "stable" government there. We need to understand how our whole involvement in the Middle East is connected to our patterns of energy consumption and connected to advancing the business interests that profit from our use of oil. We also need to know the long term impact of our policies on the lives and livelihood of other people and the new political realities that flow from people's resistance to domination and exploitation. Just as the Tulsa attacks in 1921 were really not about a black elevator operator assaulting a white woman in a department store, but were more an effort to stop the growing commercial success of Tulsa's affluent black population, we need to know what is really at stake in Afghanistan and Iraq and Somalia -- countries on Bush's short list of places to attack while fighting terrorism.

Since there is so much intuitive understanding in the black community, we have to ask where are our so-called leaders? Where are the voices saying, like Malcolm said in the early 60s, that you can't understand what's going on in the Congo unless you understand what's going on in Mississippi and that you can't understand what's going on in Mississippi unless you understand what's going on in the Congo? When will they tell us that you can't understand what's going on in Cincinnati and New York unless you understand what's going on in Afghanistan, and that you can't understand what's going on in Afghanistan unless you understand what's going on in Cincinnati and New York? Do they really think we need to try to prove our patriotism by endorsing the mob? Don't they know that we represent the highest of what is best about the USA when we question and challenge, as we always have, the policies and practices that are accepted by others? In some ways we have to lead the struggle for morality, decency and democracy in the US. But that is not a role that is foreign to us.

In the mean time, the lynch mob goes on and other Americans with the mob mentality stay wrapped comfortably in the flag, not thinking and sometimes not concerned about the truth of what is happening. As that continues, blacks at the grassroots level will keep on drawing on our history and drawing on the understanding that grows out of our current reality. We have to speak out, try to ask the right questions and in doing so help build the movement that will lead this nation toward correcting the injustices it imposes on us and on the rest of the world.

## **A Response to the Opponents of Neighborhood Schools**

1998

*Opponents of Neighborhood Schools say: People have fought and died for integration. So how can you support neighborhood schools that would be segregated?*

Supporters of Neighborhood Schools respond: Some of the same people who were involved in the struggle for integration support neighborhood schools because they see that this does not mean opposing all integration. You cannot equate school bussing for racial balance with integration. They are not the same. No one fought and died for bussing. We need neighborhood schools because "there are some things that our children need that they are not getting now." (These are the words of an 86 year old former teacher of 37 years who fought for integration and saw both segregated schools and schools after bussing and racial balance.) We need schools in our community that we control so we can make sure our children do get what they need. You do not need white children sitting next to you to learn, but you do need an empowered, involved community.

*Opponents of Neighborhood Schools say: We have to have racial balance in schools because diversity is important since we live in a diverse world.*

Supporters of Neighborhood Schools respond: Yes, we live in a diverse world, and we will continue to do so, but the best preparation for being involved and productive in that diverse world is to approach it with self confidence and the necessary tools and skills to succeed. We have a better opportunity to help instill that in the majority of our young people in neighborhood schools. Then they will be able to function anywhere in the world with anyone they come in contact with. What we have done instead with bussing is let the school system continue to cripple, stigmatize, and criminalize many of our young people so that the public school is the last diverse setting they function in. It is more important to prepare young people to function in an integrated society than it is to force them to integrate the schools and so damage them that they have a hard time functioning anywhere.

*Opponents of Neighborhood Schools say: Neighborhood schools would be second class schools. They will always get cheated out of what they need.*

Supporters of Neighborhood Schools respond: Neighborhood schools will only be second class if we let them. The Black community has a responsibility to its children to continue to be vigilant and fight for justice and equity. We need to demand that we have the facilities, the resources, the equipment and the instructional programs that our children need to get a first rate education. Where some of our children need more resources because of their home situations or because of the history of discrimination and inequity in the schools, we should insist that they get it. We cannot concede the

responsibility to get our children what they need to the white parents by thinking that their mere presence will insure that our children will get it.

Where we have had bussing and racial balance, our children have still gotten second-class education even within white schools. Being in racially balanced schools has not guaranteed good educations. In asking for schools in our neighborhoods, we as a community are asking for more control over our children's education, not less. Certainly we should not concede that our children are better off if other people have more control of their education than we do. That seems to be what the proponents of bussing are saying.

*Opponents of Neighborhood Schools say: Neighborhood schools will be segregated schools since neighborhoods are segregated.*

Supporters of Neighborhood Schools respond: While that sounds true, in a sense it is not. The type of segregation that neighborhoods have is a type of defacto segregation that is not the universal law of the land. In fact some neighborhoods are identifiably Black and some are identifiably white, and some are neither. Some of the schools with assignment plans based on neighborhoods would be majority white, some majority Black and some would be well mixed. That is not what the school segregation that people fought and died to end was like. Those of us who are old enough to remember, or who have carefully grasped the history of that period know that schools were segregated PERIOD. That was the law. The struggle was to end those laws, and to open those doors of opportunity to our children.

Once the doors were open, it was another question whether or not to force some children to go through those doors. We did not force anyone to take advantage of laws integrating public accommodations. We did not force anyone to take advantage of laws against discrimination in voting. We did not force anyone to take advantage of open housing laws. It was only with school integration that some people feel it is justified to force children to go to schools they don't want to go to in order to advance our civil rights.

*Opponents of Neighborhood Schools say: Going back to Neighborhood schools would be turning back the clock on the progress we have made with race relations.*

Supporters of Neighborhood Schools respond: There are two things wrong with this statement. First, you can't go back where you have never been. We have never had neighborhood schools. Black children were regularly bused past white schools near their homes to the Negro schools that the law assigned them to. If that were not the case, there would not have been a Brown v Board case in Topeka Kansas in 1954 where the young Miss Brown lived closer to the white school she was denied entry to. If she could have gone to school in her neighborhood her daddy would not have needed to sue the school board. If there had been neighborhood schools, most of the Little Rock 9 would have already been able to go to Little Rock Central High School and President Eisenhower would not have had to send the 101st Airborne to let those

children into school. Neighborhood schools as we are describing them would have satisfied much of what we were struggling for as it related to school assignment. The need would have still existed as it does now to exercise more control over what is going on in those schools, but that is a different, though related fight.

The second problem with the turning back the clock argument is that for far too many of our children, the clock never went forward. The quality of the education that too many of our children received in the racially balanced schools that they attended was not adequate and represented no substantial progress for them over the type of education they received in the segregated schools of the past. In fact I would argue that many segregated school systems did a better job of educating our children than the current integrated system is doing. That is not to say that we should return to segregation, but it does say we should stop talking about progress that hasn't been made yet.

*Opponents of Neighborhood Schools say: Even with neighborhood schools, some children will be forced to go to schools in their neighborhood when they don't want to. There will always be someone who is dissatisfied.*

Supporters of Neighborhood Schools respond: All the schools, regardless of the neighborhood they are in should be good schools. This will go a long way toward ending the dissatisfaction of those who don't want to go to a particular school. For others who would still like to go elsewhere, there need to be a range of educational choices available to children who for various reasons don't want to go to the school in their neighborhood. There should be special theme schools in the Arts, and in Science and Technology or Language Arts. Even in schools having a special theme, there should be all round instruction in basic subjects. These schools would differ from Magnet schools in that their purpose would not be primarily for increasing diversity and bringing white students into Black neighborhoods, but they should be high quality programs to enhance the education of the children and give them more choice.

*Opponents of Neighborhood Schools say: All of this misses the point. Just having neighborhood schools won't cure everything. Look at Dudley. It still has problems. We need more money and better facilities and better programs.*

Supporters of Neighborhood Schools respond: Yes, Dudley still has problems although it cannot really be called a neighborhood school. Too many children in Morningside Homes and other low-income neighborhoods are excluded from going there. In addition, the community input and control is not what it needs to be. It is true that we need more money, better facilities and better academic programs. We must continue to fight for those things. We also need our schools in our communities as institutions that help anchor the community and give it pride and stability. With busing we gave up too many of our institutions. Many of our communities had nothing left in them that we could take any pride in. It is true that neighborhood schools will not cure everything but they put us in a better position to fight for what



we need. When we get in that position it is still important that we get involved in that fight for our children's needs and their survival.

*Opponents of Neighborhood Schools say: All of the supporters of neighborhood schools support segregation.*

Supporters of Neighborhood Schools respond: That is simply not true. Segregation was and is wrong. Many of us were part of the fight against it and will continue to fight it. No child should be excluded from any school or any school activity because of his race. Wanting to see schools rebuilt in our communities, and see children educated near their homes does not mean supporting segregation. We think that the best way to have deeply involved communities that will see to it that our children are respected, nurtured, and armed with the tools and skills they need to succeed is by having community control of neighborhood schools. The opponents of neighborhood schools would put that responsibility in the hands of someone else.

## People's Power - Not all Votes are Created Equal

*August 21, 2002*

In the development of real "people's power", it should be noted that not all votes are created equal. The real process of "empowerment" needs to include "consensus" processes that recognize this inequity of abstractly equal representation. Demagogy, and rule by political polling both err in the direction of the western, electoral democracy paradigm. "One man, one vote" emerged as a slogan for democracy but conceals the real inter-relationship of people deciding and uniting around their real needs and interests.

Some young people were once asked how they would decide which movie to go to if it turned out that they did not all agree initially on the one they wanted to see. One person suggested that they would vote. On digging a little deeper, it was revealed that while this answer sounded like what the interlocutor wanted, the truth is that they actually seldom voted in such a situation. The real process was different. Not everyone felt as strongly as the others about their choices. After a discussion, it could even end up being the movie that would have received the least votes that is finally agreed on, if the advocate for that movie makes a good case for why it would be the best one to go to, and the others trust the honesty of his opinions and welcome the new information.

What does it mean to say that some people feel more strongly about their views than others? What is the significance of the fact that some have thought more about their views than others? Should all know the basis for the views and attitudes of each other? Wouldn't that be an important part of trying to make the best decision?

The fallacy of contemporary public-opinion-polling lies in the notion that in a random telephone call, made to someone at dinnertime, interrupting his watching the network news, he is likely to express a view more profound than a simple reflection of the prejudices expounded by the mass media in its version of what is happening in the world - the news. In some sense, "polling" then is a reflection of itself, since the same basic method is used to determine what is "news". [Or the view that the sum of many superficial opinions is a profound opinion rather than the average of a lot of superficiality.] To avoid thinking of this in a purely circular fashion, it can also be seen that the interests of the rich and powerful who own and hence control the vehicles for both the polling and the mass media are expressed in a weighted manner, but with a weight not connected to deeper contemplation of the issues at hand, but rather with the weight of their narrower class interests.

The truth is that a lot of people are not sure what they think. Efforts are made to sway their opinion one way or the other, but the methods to do that are not widely or equitably available. It becomes very important to create the mechanism by which

people can engage in "deep" discussion of issues before coming to a conclusion, and not allowing the inertia of "prevailing" opinions to hold the day by default.

When an African village was being introduced to the idea of western type democracy, some of the people laughed and asked "Why should the view of a youth be treated as though it was as important as the view of an elder?"

#### Wisdom vs. honesty

In the contest between the elder and the youth, the elder has more access to experience, but is also more likely to be tainted by it. We could conclude that this averages out, and that the youth and the elder have equally valid since equally flawed approaches to things, but this can lead to a method that maximizes the worst of both of their contributions.

What is needed is for the elder to have the opportunity to lay his experience and understanding on the table, and for the youth, informed by it to lay his connection with the future and lack of cynicism there along with it, to decide what to do. Instead of this, we often find ways of combining the cynicism of old age with the inexperience of youth and get the worst of all possible worlds.

#### Consensus processes

In the struggle for consensus, all views and all the involved people are respected. Avoiding "winners and losers" is the desired outcome. The final decision needs to be one that all can say "I can live with that". Even when it is necessary to reserve full support for an idea.

## Some Notes on Segregation

*March 3, 1999*

The use of some words causes a lot of confusion because these words carry with them the weight of everyone's history, interpretation and misinterpretation. Such words don't provide much clarity and often when used, require more work to explain what is meant than would be required to rephrase the discussion in other language. In the context of dealing with redistricting and neighborhood schools, such a word is "segregation". Recently, there has been a lot of discussion about neighborhood schools and segregation. It has been said that by asking to go "back to neighborhood schools", we are asking for "resegregation". In this paper, I will explain my view of part of what is at stake. Very briefly, my view on segregation and neighborhood schools is as follows:

- \* Advocating neighborhood schools is not the same as advocating segregation.
- \* We can't "go back" to neighborhood schools, because we have never had them.
- \* "Neighborhood schools" are different from the "segregated schools" many of us fought to end.
- \* The type of "segregation" that exists in neighborhoods is qualitatively different from the "segregation" that once characterized our school systems.
- \* The argument that "neighborhood schools will be segregated schools because neighborhoods are segregated" is sophistry and creates a lot of confusion. It does this by calling two very different things - "neighborhood segregation" as it exists today and "school segregation" as it existed 45 years ago - by the same name. They are different, and what needs to be done about them, is different.
- \* What our children need, can be better addressed in neighborhood schools even though we will still need to be vigilant and continue to struggle for equity and justice and expanded opportunity for all our children.
- \* By continuing to put the main load of the burden to integrate the society on our children, we are setting many of those children up to fail.
- \* In the fight against Jim Crow, in no institution other than education have Blacks been forced to integrate with whites.
- \* So much confusion has been generated that even old style segregation - excluding Black children from some schools and school programs because of their race -- has been used as a tool to help further "integration".
- \* The key to racial harmony and understanding is the interaction of people of different races as equals. This will for some require a period of preparation and development during which there may be some voluntary separation of people.
- \* We should encourage the development of the institutions that allow our young people to be nurtured, loved and to grow into their full potential as the real preparation for integration and diversity.

The remainder of this paper is a collection of notes and thoughts that help explain why I feel the way that is expressed in bullet points above. (I will not dwell too deeply on the essential characteristics of education and what our neighborhood schools should be like here. That is done in a separate paper called "Some Educational Principles.")

1. To segregate (v) is to separate. And "segregation" is simply the fact of things being separated. Implicit in this notion is the separation of parts into like groups. This is a process of selection and choice, and it also requires the capacity to judge "likeness" of things. Many times it is in the judgment of likeness (or in the prejudgment of it) that the difficulty lies. Some people often assume the existence of characteristics that are reliably predicted by the race of another. This is the basic racist assumption. There are in fact very few things that we know about someone simply by knowing his race.
2. All of life is about selection and choices. All of our associations are connected with some sense of selection, choice and judgment about what people are like and which people are alike. We would typically choose to engage in conversation with people with whom we share some common interests. No one questions this. No one usually calls this segregation, except when the selection always ends up reflecting separation along lines commonly called "race". We regularly handle our social associations along lines that discriminate (another word for choose) among all the possible associations. Some factors include religious affiliation - Catholic, Baptist, Buddhist, Moslem or AME, etc., taste in music - country, rap, jazz, R&B, Classical, or gospel etc., interests - hunting, fishing, Carolina Basketball, or A&T Football. There is something profoundly American about our freedom of association. All these associations at some level lead to some level of segregation, because we select and associate with these "like" groups. All of these associations flow in some way from our reaching some conclusion what people are like and how they are alike. We do this either by judging on the basis of what we know about the people or prejudging on the basis of no facts but rather assumptions as to what is likely to be the case. This "prejudgment" is the root of "prejudice".
3. The most segregated hour in America has been described as being 11 AM on Sunday. The idea that people choosing to worship separately is a big problem is open to debate. The fact of the matter is that white people would be welcomed in the overwhelming majority of Black churches in America on any Sunday. It is probably also true that very few white churches would refuse to welcome Black worshippers. There is much to be said about the liturgical traditions that people feel comfortable with and the right of people in America to worship as they chose with whom they chose. Certainly this type of "segregation" does not merit the disdain that is appropriate when looking at the way schools were segregated. In fact, there is nothing wrong with people being among themselves on the basis of things they have in common. I also doubt that many people would want to ar-

gue that separate churches, even those with fewer resources are "inherently unequal".

4. Not all separation of people is wrong. There is some "segregation" based on clear-cut physical factors, particularly gender. We maintain separate toilet facilities for males and for females. At one time there was an accepted practice of having separate educational facilities for males and females too. At the time some of these institutions based their existence on assumptions of differences in what males and females need to know. This is no longer as widely accepted as it once was, but it was certainly a form of segregation, some of which still exists.
5. There is "segregation" and there is "segregation". All segregation is not created equal. Forty-five years ago there existed throughout the American south a dual and segregated, separate and unequal school system that maintained schools for Negro children and schools for white children. That was the law of the land in many southern and Border States. That system denied the basic rights of the Black community to equal access to educational facilities. Schools in the Black community ended up with second hand and second-rate equipment, books, facilities and instructional programs. Schools for Negroes, as we were called then, were established to prepare us for a subservient role in society. We were only to be trained to be the "hewers of wood and the drawers of water". We were not trained to be scientists or doctors or political leaders or civil rights activists. We were only trained to fit into the social role of second class citizens that had been proscribed for us. It was against that segregated Jim Crow educational system that a massive struggle was organized including the courts, the legislatures and the streets. At the root of that struggle was the question of the denial of opportunity. The object of the struggle was opening doors to institutions that had been closed to us. Laws existed that forced Black people to stay out of institutions that we felt afforded us more opportunity for success in life because they gave us a better education. Education was seen as a key to success. Very few Black people would have sacrificed very much for the right to rub shoulders with whites. The struggle was for open access to educational opportunity. This became obscured and perverted when the struggle against segregation turned toward the struggle for racial balance and bussing became its chief tool. It was then that we moved away from opening doors and instead began forcing people through them.
6. Sometimes the separation process involves an element of coercion. Even coercion is not always wrong. We lock the doors of our homes to exclude people who are not in our families from entering. That is OK. In the past the doors of some schools were "locked" to exclude children of other races from entering. That was not OK. It was reprehensible and morally repugnant.
7. The segregated school system was coercive. It used the force of law and lynch mob enforcement of that law to keep Black children away from access to education in white institutions. Such a system was, and is wrong. Black children had to pass by white schools to go to materially inferior ones that were set up especially for them because Black inferiority was an accepted social and legal norm in this

country. Children could not go to schools in their neighborhoods unless those schools were the ones designated for people of their race. Every time I hear someone talk about "returning to neighborhood schools", I wonder what they are talking about. When did we ever have neighborhood schools? My family lived closer to the "white" Little Rock Central High School than to the Black Horace Mann High. If there had been neighborhood schools in Little Rock, you would have never heard of the Little Rock "9". The little Brown girl, whose parents sued the board of Education in Topeka, Kansas, lived right across the street from a school where she was denied entry. If there had been neighborhood schools there, there would not have been a Brown v. Board of Ed. Neighborhood schools have not been tried and failed. They have never been tried.

8. But, some will say, 'neighborhood schools will be segregated schools since neighborhoods are segregated'. As I said earlier, there is segregation and there is segregation. Not all segregation is created equal. Neighborhoods are separated by a number of factors: cost of housing separates where people live by income. Race is a major factor in the income disparity between people, but certainly not the only one. History, culture, economics and some other factors separate people in where they live by race. There was a time when the law separated where people lived simply by the color of their skin. Housing discrimination was legal and common. It is now against the law for some one to refuse to sell another a house because of his race. This law has not led to a rapid integration of housing patterns. Some people chose to stay in their community where they know people and are comfortable. There have been many others who have moved out of the traditional Black community over the last 40 years because it is legal to do so, because they have the economic where-with-all to do so, and because they chose to.
9. There is probably much more neighborhood integration today than ever before, but there is still not much. So, if we have school attendance based on neighborhood it would be reflective of the patterns that exist in housing and that would mean that there would not be an equal or near equal balance in the racial make-up of schools. Is that the same as the school segregating we fought against? Or isn't using "segregation" in these two different ways a play on words that leads to confusing some different concepts?
10. In all fairness, we should also ask if there are profound negative consequences of "defacto segregation" even if it is different from what was struggled against in the south and Border States in the 1950's and 1960's? Those who would argue that separate education is "inherently unequal" might say that this is so. But we should remember that in many parts of the world there are no white people. We would necessarily be among ourselves while we are being educated. Are we saying that Blacks will always get an inferior education there? There are towns in the USA that are virtually all Black. Are we saying that the children of those towns will always get an inferior education to the white children in all white towns? There are communities in side many large cities that are virtually all Black. Are we saying that the children in those communities cannot be properly

educated without importing some white kids into their schools? I think not. It should be evident that we can have schools that educate our children well regardless of the racial composition of the school. This has been proven repeatedly by our history and the current experience of schools at all levels. In the 1890's when Washington DC was strictly segregated, the one Black school there had higher achievement levels than 2 of the three white schools there. There are overwhelmingly Black schools in Chicago whose test scores on standardized tests are in the upper 10 percent of all the schools in the city. These examples while not exhaustive are certainly too few. But they do prove that schools that do not have the proper ratio of Black and white children are still capable of educating our kids. We have certainly proven over the last 30 years that children in schools that are racially balanced do not necessarily get a good education. If our children are not being educated well, then something else is wrong outside of the racial composition of the school and we should fix it.

11. We should be mindful of the fact that some people are always susceptible to confusion, and that some people wanted to end segregation precisely so that they and their children could be next to white people. But that is not the stuff that you can build mass movements out of. It should be remembered that in no arena of American life other than grade school education did the courts pursue the integration of the races beyond the removal of the Jim Crow barriers that characterized the segregated system. When we won the access to public accommodations, no one mandated that that access had to be used. No one set up ratios for balancing hotel room rentals, or restaurant dining. No one tried to require that a certain number of Blacks should ride on previously segregated busses. All that was required was that the barriers be removed. Nowhere, but in the arena of education was a decision made to mandate the mixing of the races. Why do we put this burden on our children to do something that is done nowhere else? {see magnet schools using segregation to advance integration below }
12. Of course there is an argument to be made for diversity. People can and should learn from each other. Cross-cultural contact is an important part of the overall educational process and is very important in a multicultural society. But as we seek these advantages we must ask the price. Certainly it would be unfair to Black students if we required them to accept a status of a lab experiment to be studied and examined for other's education. Certainly it would be unfair to them if we required that they always explain or defend the actions and attitudes of all the other members of their race. Certainly it would be unfair to them if we consistently put them in situations where the economic disparity between their communities and others was an ongoing source of ridicule. But we have done all these things and more in the name of diversity.
13. We still have to ask ourselves, is it simply contact between people, or is it the interaction of different people as equals that builds understanding and respect among the races? I would argue the latter. During slavery there was a considerable amount of contact at all levels (economic, social, and personal intimacy) between Blacks and whites, yet no mutual respect emerged. Each party acted out



his role in a historically staged play with the predictable consequence that everyone's preconceived notion was reinforced by what he saw. It was like actors standing behind their masks in a Greek play where their real features and their real humanity was invisible to the audience. This is pretty much what has been observed in many of the relations developed in public schools in the period of forced bussing. White students and teachers who think of Black people as lazy and ignorant have been reinforced in that self-fulfilling perception by what they saw in these institutions that they had created for themselves. To the extent that many Black youth felt alienated and abused by the educational system, their behavior in response to this was seen by whites as proof of the existing stereotypes. Black people who felt that whites were hostile, insensitive and deceptive felt justified with their observance of the conduct of many white students playing out those roles.

14. (I keep saying “many” because nothing is universally true of everyone. There will always be some anecdotal evidence of improved relations between individual students, but I will bet, that if you go into one of the "racially balanced" schools in this county today, you will observe Black students largely staying to themselves and white students largely doing the same. If you were to interview students of either race you will find that each hold the basic stereotype views that I have mentioned, even though there will be some exceptions to the rule. To some degree, what I am describing happens the least when smaller numbers of Blacks are assimilated into white institutions. There, there is more of an opportunity that their humanity will show, but also a great possibility that this heightened understanding is bought at a price of greater alienation of those Blacks from their own community. It is almost as some of us are told "You'd be alright if you would stay away from those other niggers." Sadly, some of us fall for it.)
15. What is really required to build true understanding and respect among people is interaction as equals. This can only happen when our youth feel self-confident, develop identity, pride and a sense of themselves and have their creative energies are unleashed. Supportive and nurturing neighborhood schools play a role in creating the atmosphere in which this can take place. We also need more situations and processes where people come into contact with each other as equals. The public schools have so far proven not to be very good at this. The task of creating opportunities for interaction as equals may be difficult at first, given the history of racism, cultural isolation and cultural chauvinism. But it can and must be worked out.
16. Let's look at "segregated" housing. No one who is serious questions that some people can afford some things, and not others. It can and should be pointed out that the current economic disparity is too wide, and is itself unjust. We need to find ways to narrow that gap - between the haves and the have-not's. For many of us, the struggle around good education is a part of that fight. It is connected with expanding the opportunity of those with limited financial resources to provide an education for their children to go further than they did in life. The question is can we put housing segregation, as it is a result of that economic disparity, in the

same category as racial segregation in the schools? I think not. People can and do change their economic status and with that they change their options as to where they will live. People cannot typically change their race, nor would most of us want to even if we could. One type of "segregation" is a dynamic factor connected with choices as well as opportunities as well as fate, the other is simply a fact of history and genetics and politics of racial definition. (I have to say that because "race" is not nearly so much a "fact" as it is made out to be. Racial definitions vary from state to state in the USA and vary even more widely in other countries around the world. The definitions are themselves a product of the history of the development of economic and social relations in a place. But the definitions are fixed not just in law but also in the consciousness of people, and could not be simply changed by decree.)

17. Do people who want neighborhood schools want segregation? The answer depends on whom you are talking about. It is almost certainly the case that some whites who are not satisfied with the result of the struggle to integrate public education and are uncomfortable about their children associating with Black children see neighborhood schools as a way to avoid contact with Black children. However despicable we may find this, this is not the same as wanting to return to the old days of de jure (by law) segregation. There are social conditions that have led some middle class and upper class Black folks to not want their children in school with poor Black kids. The palatable explanation is that we are not talking about race, we are talking about economics. Certainly, this too is a form of segregation, and it is just about as despicable from middle class Blacks as it is from whites who tend to lump all Black folks together. If some of these white people were questioned closely, we would probably find that they do not mind their kids spending time around the children of Black doctors and lawyers and engineers, either. But back to the question of neighborhood schools and segregation: The bulk of Blacks who want neighborhood schools are not hard line Black nationalists. Rather, they are people who think that we in the Black community must take much of the responsibility for educating our children, and that the school institutions should be more closely connected to communities and held accountable to them.
18. There is also the question if neighborhoods are segregated and this would lead to schools being segregated, why are we making children bear the brunt of integrating our community whole? Why don't we require that adults go to Laundromats and grocery stores that are not near their homes so we can increase the interaction between Blacks and whites? Why don't we force people to be bused or drive to assigned libraries and churches? Most would think such rules silly. They are. But isn't it silly to force children to integrate buildings when the programs in those buildings remain segregated ostensibly by ability groupings, but objectively by race? How satisfying is that situation? What good did it ever do to have a magnet school in a Black community with a small attendance zone around that school then have functionally two different schools operating inside the same building? We ended up with a white and middle class Black magnet program and a poor Black regular school with many children in special-ed and remedial

classes all housed under one roof? What did they share - the lunchroom? So what? Maybe if you averaged all the standardized test scores, you would end up with the achievement levels in the Black neighborhood improving. O what evil lurks inside the statistics we give so much credence to.

19. Split sessions, and space science -1957 Sputnik. As recently as the 1960's some school districts in the south had what were known as "split sessions" for their Black schools. There were long school breaks in the spring and again in the fall for cultivation and then harvesting the prevailing agricultural crop. This placed the education of Black children in a clearly subordinate position to the maintenance of the economy. White children in the same areas remained in school. This situation was so bad in some school districts that by the ninth grade some Black children had only been in school as long as white children had by the sixth grade.
20. The launching of Sputnik in 1957 was part of the beginning of the end of this process. America's backwardness in the space race caused many educators to re-think the educational levels of Americans in general. Science kits began to be widespread in elementary schools. New Math that went beyond the rote recitation of arithmetic tables gained ascendancy. Part of the fight against segregation must be viewed in this context. Where we had a school system that was part of the limiting of our horizons, we had a need to fight. We had to expand the opportunities to our children to be prepared for the world introduced by Sputnik, and not just for the cotton fields, and the tobacco fields.
21. Education has been for the status quo in the dominant society. Education has been used as a tool for social control in a society that was built on domination and exploitation. But when we look at fighting against segregation as a part of moving our people forward, the key question is whether we are fighting against or defending the status quo in society. That status quo has Black people on the bottom in America and throughout the world. Our proper education needs to speak to that fact and how to end it, rather than just how to fit into it. It is pretty clear that (Black Liberation) is not the principle orientation of the white schools we integrated into. While some skills and some information were available in white schools that were more difficult to attain in Black schools, the intent of those schools was never to facilitate the utilization of that information and those skills in the interest of our community. That would have required a process external to the newly integrated white schools that oriented our young people to their responsibilities to their community, much like the better Black educators had attempted to do during the period of strict segregation. Such a mechanism did not come into being. Instead there was complacency on the part of some of our leadership that things would be OK now that our children were where the money was.
22. There are those who argue against neighborhood schools by saying "to fight Jim Crow, you go where the money is". Their argument for bussing children to racially balance schools is that we must put our children in the white schools, because that is where the money is. The assumption is that if white people don't

have their children in a school, at best our children will be neglected. Even in the years after the *Brown v. Board* decision, when there were open assignment policies that allowed children the choice of which school they would attend, some folks looked at the remaining patterns of school attendance, saw that the majority of Black children were in schools that they had historically been assigned to and complained that these children would never receive the benefits of integration. They felt that since there were no white children in their schools, they would receive an inherently inferior education and they would not receive the resources that white people had for their children in their schools. The resulting struggles for racial balance in schools were largely carried out in the courts with numerous decisions coming down that attacked "de facto segregation" and mandated school bussing plans and the establishment of school balance goals. This was never a mass struggle. Most Black families had "voted with their feet" when they left their children in the traditionally Black schools. It is erroneous to talk about people in our community having fought and died over school bussing. It did not happen.

23. It is also clear from the last 30 years of forced bussing, that being where the money was did not guarantee a quality education. Tracking, magnet programs, ADHD classes, Academically Gifted programs selection procedures, suspensions and expulsions and simple neglect in the classroom were all parts of the mechanisms that prevented many of our children from getting all that they needed even when they were in a school where the money was.
24. Magnet schools were developed as a method of achieving integration and diversity without forced bussing. The idea was to create "super schools" using the latest innovation, best teachers and best resources and put these schools inside the Black community to attract white students. Seats in these schools were set aside for the white students who were being sought. It is ironic that one of the results of a struggle for access to better educational resources for Black children was the establishment of institutions, in our community, not for the purpose of better educating Black children, but rather for the purpose of attracting white children. There were instances where quotas were established and Black children were excluded from magnet school programs in their communities for the purpose of saving spaces for white children who did not want to go. This was the insanity of using segregation - the forceful exclusion of some children because of their race - to fight for integration - the mixing of Black and white children in school buildings. It never did make much sense, but when it was questioned, the response came back that the federal guidelines required it.
25. Two things are wrong with this magnet school concept. First, if we know better what children really need for their education, we have a responsibility to provide it for all the children, not just for a select few. Second, it obviously makes no sense at all to seek to correct the exclusion of Black children by excluding them from the best schools that were placed in their communities. The result of the magnet process was as ridiculous as the assumptions upon which it rested. We ended up with two separate schools, one overwhelmingly Black, the other

sometimes majority white, with different teachers and different classrooms for different students all housed under one roof, sharing toilet and lunch facilities.

26. Going hungry is not good preparation for famine. The idea that we should throw our children into hostile educational environments at an early age so they can learn to deal with the racism and hostility of the society is foolishness. You don't practice for a famine by fasting. All that might do is condition you to the pain you will encounter but it will not give you the stored up nutrition that will allow you to get through it. It is better to overeat for a while, if you know you are going where food is scarce. Our children will see enough real racism, discrimination and isolation in the world as adults. As children we need to fill them so full of themselves that they are self-confident and no one can make them doubt themselves and their full humanity. That is why the idea of a wholesome, nurturing educational environment is so important. When our children face the irrationality and insanity of the society, they should question the society and not themselves. It is out of this questioning of the society with a deep sense of commitment and responsibility to the community that we can inspire the creative thinking required to give some answers to the question of how can we fix what is wrong.
27. There is still a need today to direct the efforts to educate our youth toward a type of education that concerns them with freedom and the equality of man and the uplifting of their communities.
28. Neighborhood schools will not cure all the problems of education. By themselves, they will not cure any of the things wrong with education. Why you may ask are some people putting so much emphasis on them then? For two reasons. First, these are our children. We have a responsibility to them that goes beyond that of anyone else. In order for us to discharge this responsibility, we need them in our community in institutions that we as a community can influence and control. Second, we need to reinvolve our whole community with all of its parts. The best conditions under which we can do this is with institutions in the community that are the focus of our efforts. All that neighborhood schools will do is set up better conditions for the struggle that will have to go on anyway. The struggle to get parents and businessmen and businesswomen and working people and churches more involved with children is an ongoing struggle. The struggle for equity in funding, facilities, and program is an ongoing struggle. The struggle for the minds of our children from all the self-destructive forces and temptations that they find all around them is an ongoing struggle.
29. We have a need to inspire young people and get them thinking about the realities of the world they live in and how those realities affect their community. We need to help them make decisions about how they will fit into the labor force or the business world of tomorrow on the basis of an informed view of what is going on. We need to expose our young people to the possibility of their own success.

30. We have to move in this direction if we are to prepare our youth for democracy, citizenship and adulthood as opposed to preparing them for submission, oppression, dependency, social pathology and childishness.

## **Are we meeting their needs?**

*November 6, 2003*

A couple of weeks ago I got to meet with some of the young men at Dudley High School who had been at A&T State University for one of the new college based high school programs like the ones at Guilford College, Bennett College and Greensboro College. This particular group had been sent back to Dudley after being identified as discipline problems on the College campus. I found the 15 of them I met with under the auspices of a mentoring program to be attentive, intelligent and polite.

After I described to them some of the high speed production equipment that I regularly help to keep running in my industrial job and then told them that my company does very little hiring, one of them asked me an astute question: "If they keep making faster machines that don't need many people to run them, pretty soon no one will have a job."

"You are exactly right," I told him. "That is almost certainly one of the biggest problems in the 21st century, and you young men will have to help figure out how to solve it."

We really need to understand the importance of these young men. I had met one of them several weeks earlier, shortly after they were sent back to Dudley. "Do you really want me to tell you what happened," he began as he proceeded to tell me what had gone on. "When we got there, there were no books, no teachers and no rooms assigned to some of our classes. They didn't have anything for us."

It seems that this program expanded from a successful program with 25 students a year ago to a failing program of 125 students a year later. I have been told that there were federal funds available if the program was bigger than the pilot that had first been established. But after getting the money for the program, someone dropped the ball and forgot to make sure that the young people's needs were met. Whatever else may be these young men's faults, only tended to worsen in a situation where it was again clear to them that they were not deemed to be very important.

The fact is that they are important. Our inability to meet their needs today will not make them go away tomorrow. They are a part of this community, and if properly respected and properly treated they are a huge asset to the community. It will in fact fall upon them to either solve the problems of the community or to be the problems of the community. All too often, I think that some adult forget this.

I have seen email messages from distraught white parents who talked about the need to put one of the middle schools under "martial law" in order to prevent the disrupters from keeping other students from learning. This doesn't strike me as being a very

intelligent approach and in the concrete context that it emerges, it smacks a great deal of racism and elitism.

What is the significance of some students learning and others not? Do we think that if we ignore "bad kids" they will go away? Do we really think that we can intimidate young people into "acting right"? Has anyone there spent much time with them asking them what they are interested in and how they think they might best learn what will help them in the future?

I doubt it. I think that if they could find meaningful ways to communicate with the young people without making baseless threats, they would find the same thing that I found when talking to the young men at Dudley.

It doesn't take all that much to get them thinking about this community and its economic and social future. It isn't hard to get them interested in planning for how they would like to prepare themselves for tomorrow. It is not that hard to get them to look at some of the ways that grown folks have messed up the world and to begin thinking about what needs to be done to fix it.

If adults involved in educating young people could only appreciate the natural tendency of youth to seek to please adults and acquire their skills and power, we would be able to find ways to effectively deal with them. In this current climate, however of "zero-tolerance" and high-stakes-standardized testing it is hard to do what is needed. We need to sit back, though and remember how important young people are and invite them to become a part of our strategizing to make a better world.



## Not Knowing What You Are Missing

*December, 2003*

Looking at the commercialization of Christmas and thinking of all of the parents going into debt to secure toys, trinkets, and designer clothes for their children makes me want to find a different way of looking at these things.

It doesn't take very long for all of the "new" to wear off the things they just had to have, and the children with too much stuff soon find themselves frustrated and empty feeling again - feeling worse even than the children who are not confronted with these excesses.

If you think that the "wants" which are induced by this consumer culture are natural, it may seem that those who do not participate in the splendors of modern society are really missing something. On the other hand, the same thing can be said about those who don't know the intensely pleasing "rush" of a good dose of heroin. A character in a recent movie "Trainspotting," dealing with the British drug-culture, described "shooting up" as more than a thousand times better than the best orgasm.

If we were offered the opportunity, many of us who are afraid of drugs would "pass" on finding out how good it feels,. That is because we know that the experience, however wonderful it might be for a few moments, is not sustainable. It is bad for you because it may be found to be so pleasurable that it distorts the balance of all of the rest of your life and effectively drives you mad.

The same thing can be said of modern consumer society which in many ways is much like a dose of heroin. When we look at the worldwide requirements for our consumerism, we see that it too is not sustainable. While it may be pleasurable, it is not good for us because it distorts reality in a serious way.

I once asked my father who was born in 1909 to tell me about his memories of segregation and poverty as a child since I knew that he grew up in a poor black family in the south during some of the worst days of Jim Crow segregation.

"We didn't think much about it," he told me. "We just went out with our friends and played."

In my father's generation there were no children who were too poor to have toys. No, they didn't have much money, but the idea of not having anything to play with would have been incomprehensible. Children made their own toys. A ball was made from rags and string. A hoop could be made from supple branches an old barrel or an old bicycle wheel. All that was required was a space, and other children wanting to have fun. Their bodies were exercised and their minds challenged by the creation of their own toys and by the games of agility and strategy they played with them.

Today, if a child's parents cannot afford a Super-Duper Nintendo, or a PlayStation 99 so that he can sit still for hours in front of a television screen killing villains or causing mayhem while growing obese from the junk food that he or she periodically interrupting their play retrieve from the refrigerator, then they feel deprived.

These "needs" for special kinds of toys that are fashionable for the moment, like the corresponding "needs" for designer clothes and sugary, greasy fast-food are created by a social/economic mechanism that is dependent on creating the demand then struggling to satisfy it and in doing so creating "winners and losers." -those who can keep up with the TV ads and the vast majority who go deep into debt trying to do so.

Can we honestly say that this is progress?

How very far away we are from the notion espoused by some Quakers of "living simply so that others may simply live".

Those of us who feel that we could not go back to living simply, should think of the junkie. Every day that he uses drugs, he moves further and further away from feeling like he would ever be able to do without them.

This holiday season, look at the children coming down from their "consumer/toy highs" and think again of that junkie when his high wears off.

The parallel is striking. There is something to be said for not knowing what you are missing.

# **The New Empire and Our Challenges**

## ***Speech Delivered at Guilford College***

*March 5, 2003*

We always find ourselves at a particular juncture of time and space. We are right here right now. The tasks of living in the present and accepting the challenges of our moment and place require us to look around us and at ourselves and understand where we are, what is going on, what are the needs, what are our capacities and what will we accept as our responsibilities.

In my late teens and early twenties I lived in the South of largely defeated and dying Jim Crow; in the nation of a declining manufacturing base leading to urban decay, discontent and rebellions, and in the world of the cold war on the one hand and growing national liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America on the other. In particular there was our country's aggression in Vietnam that tore the fabric of calm and tranquility and exposed the contradictions inherent in our attempt to be the new colonial power. I became an early peace advocate, a black student leader, a Black Nationalist activist supporting African Liberation struggles then later a labor activist/organizer and a community activist and writer dealing with questions of urban redevelopment and education. Now I find myself back again working on matters of international peace and opposing my government's aggressive posture in the world.

For each of you, the question of what is going on now in the world and what will be your role is one of the most important things that you can spend your time thinking about.

Toward that end I have some observations and some challenges that I would like to share with you.

We are witnessing the consolidation of the New United States of American Empire. (NUSAE)

The only future peace in the world that we are offered is a US version of 'Pax Romano' - "the peace of Rome." It is the "peace of the empire." It is the peace that follows the conquest of the weak by the strong and the submission of the powerless to the needs and interests of the most powerful in the world.

Every corner of this planet is being reordered to suit the interest of the wealthiest few of the international corporations headed by the most powerful forces in the USA.

Everything in the world that opposes US economic interests and political hegemony is painted as "Evil."

Everything that will not yield to the maximization of corporate profit is described as a grave "danger" to us.

Today the USA is engaged in an illegal war in Iraq and threatening "preemptive" strikes -- even possibly nuclear strikes -- against other countries (Iran, North Korea, Syria, Philippines, Venezuela, Cuba) that are on its "hit list."

At home we are seeing the crushing of dissent and the abandonment of the rule of law. The first amendment has become a conditional proposition that can be roped off behind lines designated as "free speech zones" by the Secret Service and their local deputies. (Do not forget the injuries of the hundreds of protestors last summer in Oregon who "naively" thought that the US Constitution's 1st amendment gave them the right to assemble and protest against the President of the United States).

Remember the names of Padillo and Hamdi. These men are US citizens who have been denied access to legal redress in the US court system because they have been merely accused (with no legal proof) of being domestic terrorists or illegal combatants. Without our intervention, "Due Process of Law" will become a historical memory along with fins on big cars, the Charleston and powdered wigs on judges.

Education is becoming more and more a standardized process for dividing our youth into "winners and losers" fitting them into their necessary social roles either in the corporate world on the one hand or in the world of fast food on the other.

Rather than creative critical thinkers, our young people are being prepared to be simply consumers whose most important task is to choose between Coke and Pepsi, between Nike and Reebok, between McDonald's and Burger King and between Tommy Hilfiger and Calvin Klein.

Our own version of "Ethnic Cleansing" is emptying communities of the poor to become the new playgrounds and resting places for the emerging gentry.

The social "safety net" has been torn to shreds and those who have fallen through its gaping holes are left to languish on the streets or else they are hidden out of the way in "shelters" that have become temporary hells and holding cells on the way back to the street or to jail.

Health care systems make promises that cannot be kept. They spend more and more on extending the lives of the more affluent terminally ill while denying people the basic dignity of respect and comfort for their infirmities as the mortality rate of the poor continues to climb along with the profits of the health maintenance, insurance and pharmaceutical companies.

The nation is waging a "war on drugs" that is in fact a "war on communities and youth." Young people are daily trapped into a drug culture which is fueled by a com-

bination of greed and despair. Too many of our young people live in neighborhoods where the black market in drugs has become a major and integral part of the economic distribution of the social product.

The prisons, often filled with non-violent victims of the "war on drugs," have become the main "growth industries" in some communities. And sadly, prisons today contain far too many of our young people. There are more young men of color in the penal system than in the institutions of higher learning.

As the fabric of life has deteriorated, the police in many of our cities have gone wild, doing in blue or black uniforms what was once only done under white sheets as a means of social control to keep people "in their places."

Retirement incomes that many of our senior citizens depend upon are being compromised by inflation and scandalous stock market schemes of the "super-greedy". In the light of these crooked schemes, small investor confidence has evaporated like the morning dew in the heat of the sun.

Middle class jobs continue to disappear as investment capital takes the latest high speed trip to "cheap-labor-land" on the vehicles of NAFTA, FTAA with the WTO and the IMF serving as dutiful travel porters.

Low paying -"service sector" jobs are emerging but still leaving the employees mostly unorganized, overworked, disrespected and poor.

There is an ongoing economic stagnation due to an economy that is capable of producing far more goods than can possibly be sold since each year production increases with fewer and fewer wage earners.

The G8, the WEF and the other assemblies of the world's richest meet in guarded secrecy to nullify the needs and aspirations of the masses of people around the world, who are becoming more and more superfluous to the economic designs of the masters of the world.

Tropical rainforests, the key to the bio-diversity of animals and plant life, as well as the oceans fishes are all falling victim to the greed of a hand full of corporations who are in the process of undoing in a few generations what has been developed and nurtured by the world's indigenous people -- the peasants and particularly women -- over thousands of years.

People who have always been able to feed themselves are starving to death with the growth of corporate agriculture taking over the world's food production and destroying the world's people's time-tested traditional ways of life and livelihood.

Energy is being utilized at an un-sustainable rate that causes the USA to stagger around throughout the world like a bullying, dangerously armed and crazed drug addict looking for another cheap fix of fossil fuel.

As this happens, our nation's foreign and domestic policies are being systematically reordered to serve that addiction.

Our country has such a level of waste and excessive consumption that if it were achieved by all the world's people it would require 4 planets the size of the earth to sustain that consumption.

Since raising the world to the level of Americans is not a possibility, we must look at the military spending that is required to maintain the "disparity" in the use of the world's resources as a large part of the basic cost of "The American Way of Life."

Our military spends more on arms and preparation for war than the next 7 largest armies in the world combined -- more than the entire social production of the majority of the world's people.

The United States props up client states around the world to serve as extensions of our power, while those states despotically subjugate their own people and their neighbors, subjecting them to exploitation and oppression to suit our selfish ends.

If we ever held it, given our history of genocide and slavery, our nation has abandoned the moral high ground. It is only blind arrogance that causes some of us to still believe that we are the world's greatest hope for freedom and democracy. We objectively take a back seat to the people's struggles in the southern hemisphere and the struggles of laboring people worldwide.

So now comes the question, "What shall we do?" "What do we need?" "Where will we fit in?" While my list is nowhere near complete, I offer the following as some of the needs that we face as a people and as a movement. I offer these as challenges to all of us and we must decide what responsibilities we will accept:

We need people who have the capacity and the willingness to stand firmly with the masses of the people and stand for the people.

We need people who have the capacity and willingness to speak out for and give voice to the voiceless.

We need people to not only defend but to also empower the powerless.

We need people to not only protect and advocate for but also to organize the unorganized to be a powerful voice of their own.

We need people to not only explain to the uninformed but also to educate them into their own creative understanding.

We need people to stand for the whole and to speak truth to power. We need to struggle for the dissolution of dominating power. We need to learn again how to come together in harmonious relationships to ourselves and the world.

These unusual times require unusual dedication and unusual effort to engage the world in transformation away from its current path toward destruction at the hands of the corrupt power that now dominates life here.

These are the challenges presented to us by this developing empire.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today.





## A Dedicated Thanks

2001

This is  
To all the ancestors.  
It is  
To the forefathers  
And the foremothers.  
It is  
To the storytellers  
And to the teachers.  
It is  
To the fighters,  
To the victims who persevered,  
To the survivors.  
It is  
To those who dreamed  
And shared their dreams with others.  
It is  
To all those who found their own way  
To resist oppression:

You have lifted us up  
So that we can see  
Over the horizon.  
From here, we can see  
Past the rising sun.  
Now we must do  
What we must do,  
And hold aloft  
Those who will follow.



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