

Education Ceremony, October 3, 2007, Simon Fraser University, Faculty of Education. Speaker: Paul Shaker, Dean of Education.

Distinguished guests, honored new teachers, ladies and gentlemen...

I come before you today to celebrate your accomplishments as an educator at the end of his career speaking to educators near the beginning of theirs. Here in this convening of fellow teachers I wish to invoke images and ideas that bind us together and strengthen us in our profession. I do so in order that we might do good work together for others. As joyful as you are today at a culmination of your studies, I too am celebratory of one life lived among you and the fellow members of our field.

In counseling my children as they enter careers in society I have urged them to give priority not only to the nature of work in a field but to the nature of the workers in that field. In other words it matters little whether certain activities appeal to you if you are not compatible with those colleagues who populate your world of work. In this I feel most grateful: living my work life among teachers and other educators has been inspirational to me. I am privileged to have been among them and to have learned from them year after year.

This personal satisfaction can be largely explained by the fact that I think of educators as a subculture within the larger society. I like to think of us as a unique tribe within the larger nation. My hope is that we stand for something at variance from the norms of today's society, something emergent and of special value that is helping create a more realized world for tomorrow. We are not solely needed for our ability to teach in classrooms and convey formal instruction. There is a larger, indirect and as vital a role for us as examples of this other, hopefully better, way of life in our postmodern world.

I think of our minority status each time I hear our work described in economic terms. When I hear the purpose of schools and teaching defined as "providing workers" and "sustaining competitiveness" I feel wonder at how our calling can be so misunderstood and undervalued. It is as if we said to our political leaders that their role was only to pick up trash and remove snow and on these grounds alone would we evaluate them and rank them with our votes. I believe we have a much higher aspiration for our students than the voices of the marketplace ascribe to us. That aspiration has reconfigured over the centuries since classic times, but the best of us, I think, always knew the central vision of our vocation.

Jonathan Kozol, perhaps the most poetic of contemporary writers on teaching, has commented on this theme in his new book—a book for you—*Letters to a Young Teacher: But teachers, and especially the teachers of young children, are not servants of the global corporations or drill sergeants for the state and should never be compelled to view themselves that way. I think that they have a higher destiny than that. The best of teachers are not merely the technicians of proficiency; they are also ministers of innocence, practitioners of tender expectations. [They] believe that every child who has been entrusted to their care comes into their classroom with inherent value to begin with.*

At times and places throughout history that mission of education has been labeled a religious one, in service to a god or gods; or it has been called a civic one, preparing citizens for the polis, the kingdom, the nation-state; and it has been designated in economic terms, as we so often hear today. There is a tone-deafness in much of the contemporary discussion of our society—a deafness to our humanity. It is a wonder to me that any informed person would see education in such minimal terms as to designate it as primarily an economic undertaking.

This underestimation of formal teaching and learning is more astonishing because it occurs in a world so affected by non-material motives. The yearning underlying humanity's wars in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere derives from issues deeper than careers and material abundance. We observe our Western democratic societies shaken by a rage that is entirely non-economic. In the face of these events amateur observers of education direct us toward the viability of our students as cogs in the economy; and they seek to box us in to this pursuit by "accountability measures" that trivialize, deracinate, misdirect, and undermine our work.

Originally it seemed heuristic to employ business metaphors in schools and universities. Open to new associations and understandings, we entertained thinking of students as "customers" and evaluation as "accountability." But as time has gone by, the new symbols have for many consumed and distorted education's original pursuit. What was a heuristic, employed for expansion of understanding, has instead coopted the essential meaning from education in the minds of many. I urge you to restore in your careers the language of teaching to education and leave the marketplace terms in their rightful context.

Enlightened moral action is our highest calling as humans and formal education aspires to inform our understanding of ethics while arousing in us the strength to act on our best judgment. The British Columbia news this fall has been replete with the story of Kathryn Sihota who exemplifies these standards by engaging in

an act of professional conscience and civil disobedience when she refused to administer a standardized reading test to her third graders. Thus far she has been disciplined by a letter from her school board.

You should remember that you entered the profession at the moment when this courageous teacher was taking her principled stand. Let her character, conviction, and willingness to act be an inspiration to you. The point is not, of course, whether you or I agree with the particulars of her stance. The point is that her professional conscience was definitive for her and gave her the courage to act in the face of public disapproval, disciplinary measures, and economic risk. Essential to societies we consider “free” is the right and responsibility to engage in civil disobedience, that is, to follow the dictates of our conscience in non-violent ways when we are so called upon. When our conscience is stirred *professionally*, however, we are called to yet a higher standard. We are obliged to act. Essential to the professional identity is the obligation to protect our students, not only from bullets or brutality, as we have seen teachers regularly do, but also from psychological and educational vandalism against their spirits. And this is what Kathryn Sihota has sought to do.

Such moments represent more than solitary acts. In my last deanship in the heart of agricultural Fresno, California where countless poor and unskilled immigrants come to work and live, Silvio Manno rose from Italian immigrant, laborer, to become an elementary bilingual teacher. His second graders spoke only Spanish yet he was mandated in 2001 to administer the high stakes California SAT-9 test to them in English. Believing they were too young to comprehend any rationale for this classroom activity and that it would have destructive effects on them, he refused. Subsequently Manno was suspended for five days without pay. There was virtually no public support for his action.

As time went by, however, the courts and the state department of education moved much in Manno’s direction. The school district of San Francisco won a court verdict disallowing testing of this type and a system of waivers has introduced choice for parents in these matters. With respect to accountability testing we continue to have such choice as parents in British Columbia. If all professionals passively accepted regulations that conflicted with their considered judgment of best practice, would needed reforms ever occur?

Throughout human history teaching was seen as almost exclusively a conservational pursuit done in the name of transmitting existing knowledge and perpetuating societal values. Gradually since the dawn of the modern era, along with the rise of science and rationalism, has come a new, progressive ideal for

our profession. This is that education also must involve the reconstruction of experience and knowledge. In other words, that a co-equal goal of teaching, along with conveying the status quo, is to inspire inquiry, imagination, vision. Educators who break the mold are often responding to this mission. Along with others in society they have imagined racial, disability, and gender equality when the laws did not. They have doubted orthodoxies about science and social science only to be told what fools they were. They have had a vision of a world without want and one of peacekeepers and river-keepers often in the face of anger and ridicule.

This is the profession you enter on this autumn day. This is the profession to which I welcome you. As educators let us live up to the pledge of Desmond Tutu when he spoke here in Vancouver and asserted that all people have value and that we must be in service to them all. I hope in retrospect that I have been a worthy member of the profession of education; and similarly I hope as time goes by that you will be so judged by your students, the community, and yourselves. Let a spirit of hope infuse your work. Draw forth all.