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Column/Blog: “The Answer Sheet” by Valerie Strauss

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Are we still capable of educating for 'us-ness?'

My guest is [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.

By Marion Brady

Ronald Reagan delivered some [one-liner doozies](#), one of which is still a favorite of several members of Congress and talking heads on cable news:

“The most terrifying words in the English language are: ‘I’m from the government and I’m here to help.’”

It’s an interesting perspective, particularly when placed alongside another quote, one from Abraham Lincoln’s [Gettysburg Address](#). Those who had died on that battlefield, Lincoln said, contributed to a great cause-preserving “*government of the people, by the people, for the people.*”

A rational alien would assume, wrongly, that these two views of government came from two very different countries.

For a democracy to function, its citizens need to feel some sense of “us-ness,” togetherness, community. They need to be willing, especially when the chips are down, to put the common good ahead of excessive individual interest. A difficult, ever-changing balance has to be maintained between individual rights and collective responsibility. Too much of either invites disaster.

Listening to one of my several Libertarian neighbors a few days ago, and reading how many new billionaires and new food stamp recipients 2010 has produced, has me wondering if we have enough left of a shared concern for “the general welfare” to hang on to government of, by, and for the people.

Evidence seems to be piling up that, more so than in many other societies, we’re long on looking out for Number One and short on caring about others; long on privacy fences and gated communities, and short on concern for those beyond and outside them; long on individual liberty, and short on a sense of social responsibility and interest in community building.

In short, we’re short on what it takes to maintain a democracy.

I’m wondering why.

Is it in our genes? If you think about it, that doesn’t seem entirely unreasonable. Most of those who chose to come to America during its early years must have differed a little from those they left behind. Unlike their brothers and sisters, they were willing to trade familiarity, family, and friends for an unknown future. That suggests differences having implications for community building and democracy. It’s conceivable that many of us haven’t fallen very far from our ancestral tree.

Or was it geography? Our immigrant ancestors found a vast, sparsely populated frontier. The idea of “living beyond the sound of another man’s axe” obviously had appeal, an attitude not conducive to community building and democracy.

Or timing? Many of our ancestors came to America during the Industrial Revolution, a revolution made possible by easily accessed water power, timber, oil, coal, and other resources, and two oceans to protect us while we developed them. During that era, high-profile, self-made men, rags-to-riches stories, and the popularity of the theory of survival of the fittest, reinforced the idea that it was every man for himself.

Or was it what some historians and sociologists call the “[Protestant Work Ethic](#)”—an assumption that hard work, salvation, wealth and success, were all parts of a package deal especially assembled by God for Americans? That particular interpretation of ancient scripture downplayed the story of the Good Samaritan and the need for caring for “the least” among us, so those who bought (and continue to buy) the “Ethic” aren’t saddled with any serious community-building obligations.

Or maybe it’s our economic system, the functioning of which depends heavily on our willingness to accept its demands, load up the van, and move somewhere else to work, retire, or just start over.

Maintaining a viable democracy requires an educated citizenry willing, able, even eager, to talk about matters like these, matters having to do with who we are as a people, why we do the things we do, and where we’re headed. Those conversations require at least some understanding of the past, national character, economics, politics, government, science, religion, and so on—intellectual tools that allow us to trace the trends of our era, the curves of history, the causes and consequences of change.

Those were the kinds of conversations thoughtful educators used to try to encourage, the kinds of intellectual tools they once tried to help the young develop.

Now, not so much.

If you want to mark a date on the calendar when that happened, a good one would be September 27-28, 1989. That’s when state governors met in Charlottesville, Virginia, at a big “Education Summit” (no educators invited), and lent their considerable influence to the process of transferring control of education from local school boards and the communities they served to corporations, pausing in Congress just long enough to translate simplistic educational theory and a narrow concern for American industry into the law of the land.

That transfer of control may (or may not) have been a good-faith effort to deal with problems the locals were being slow to address. But if down the road there are still people able to write history, the transfer will be remembered as a major factor in the transition of America from a democracy to a plutocracy, and the nation’s consequent decline as a force for good as the military-industrial complex unapologetically clinched its control.

Democracy that doesn’t start with education and a sense of community, doesn’t start. Period. With Congress as America’s school board, and members of the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce cutting the checks that help elect and keep the members of that board in office, democracy is dead.

Full disclosure: I have a dog in the education reform fight. Back in the 1960s I wrote a journal article about a way to address a problem every kid in America has with school: information overload. Over the years, student seat-time hours have increased, textbooks have gotten much fatter, drills and tests have multiplied, and homework has become more onerous.

As a consequence, the amount of abstract, disconnected information dumped on kids has increased far beyond even the best student's ability to cope. Many billions of dollars and hours are invested in stuffing kids' heads with information, and as soon as exams are over they flush almost all of it.

My article dealt with the educational potential of [General Systems Theory](#) as it had developed during World War II. It could, I argued, make it possible for kids to organize, connect, and make useful sense of what seemed to them to be thousands of odds and ends of random, disconnected information.

The article caught the interest of a couple of big wheels at a major publisher. To make a very long story very short, three or four books and many years later I put together a little course of study designed to help adolescents see that what seemed to them to be separate, isolated school subjects were really several working parts of a logically integrated, mutually supportive, extremely useful knowledge-organizing system.

I mentioned the (free) course of study in a couple of journal articles, and some middle and high school principals around the country contacted me about piloting it. Then along came the assault on America's teachers, the [No Child Left Behind](#) legislation, and an organized corporate campaign to mandate the use of market forces on a social institution for which their destructive potential far exceeded their usefulness.

I was left with letters and phone calls of apology from principals saying they were sorry, but they couldn't pilot my program. If they hoped to keep their jobs, they had to concentrate on proving that their teachers had standards and were accountable.

Am I appalled by the anti-democratic centralization of educational decision making, the radical narrowing of the curriculum, the scapegoating of teachers, the misapplication of market forces, the casual destruction of already-weak communities in the name of school "turnarounds"? You betcha!

But adding greatly to my frustration is the willingness of people who see themselves as "enlightened progressives" (including many educators), to buy into the radically regressive education reform program being promoted by corporate interests with massive help from Washington.

I resent being written off as an obsolete educator—nostalgic, unwilling to let go of the past, unable to appreciate the wisdom and policies of Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein, Arne Duncan, and other education-reform heroes of naïve, educationally challenged mainstream media.

Yes, you've heard this from me before. But the failure of those now setting policy to respond to my arguments says they're not listening, or not understanding, or are so sure they know what they're doing they don't need to pay attention to someone who was wrestling with issues about which they consider themselves expert before many of them were born.

So I'll keep it short, simple, unambiguous:

- (1) We educate in order to survive.
- (2) We assign most of the responsibility for educating to public schools.
- (3) The public-school curriculum drives instruction.
- (4) That curriculum is seriously flawed. (It's necessary but not sufficient.)
- (5) Its flaws have been powerfully reinforced by the standards and accountability fad.
- (6) The new Common Core Standards that the feds are pressuring the states to adopt will lock the flawed curriculum in rigid, permanent place.
- (7) A standardized, permanent curriculum is closed to innovation.
- (8) A curriculum closed to innovation can't adapt to change.
- (9) Failure to adapt to change elevates stupidity.
- (10) Stupidity guarantees our demise. Period.

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