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Concluding Thoughts to an Education Course

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As this quarter’s course draws to a close, I am moved to share with all of you a number of reflections. First, let me say thank you for the privilege and joy of conducting this course with you. No matter what and which teachers may believe otherwise, it is you the students who make a course become or not become an exhilarating, inspiring, and genuine learning event.

The next thing I would share with you is about what the purpose of this course has been. Early, I said that we would attempt to look at the relationship of education to the major economic, political, cultural and social pillars which sustain US society. I said that the course would particularly “look at the dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in the United States, especially in urban areas.” A quote from a new book about educator Maxine Greene, A Light in Dark Times, says best what I have intended with this course:

“The purpose of this course... is to try to empower individuals to clarify and ground their own beliefs about the projects they have chosen for themselves to the end of creating themselves as thoughtful, articulate, critical and humane practitioners in a profoundly uncertain world.” (p. 7)

This course has been about opening our eyes, and ears and noses to the world about us and preventing the “imbunchinization” and “MCDONALDization of our senses and sensibilities. Contrary to the intent of the idiom,”don’t go there,”this course has been explicitly organized to encourage participants”down the road of honest and critical examination of their own assumptions, experiences, biases and actions.”

We live in a mean, mean world. It is a constantly changing world but it is a mean world, nonetheless. Yet reeling from the incidents in Wyoming and Texas, we now have had Littleton and Officer Justin Volpe and his broom handle to dampen our souls. Meanwhile, for better or for worse, our nation is once again in the saturation bombing business and we awaken to newscasters citing dead babies in hospitals as so much “collateral damage.”

I have taught and spoken here and ‘yon,’ in places throughout the world. People have often asked whether or not I was discouraged with all that I have seen and learned. I am not a pessimistic person. Growing up, in addition to two teacher parents who inspired lives for a total of more than ninety years (in some of the city’s most difficult teaching situations), my models were the civil rights struggle and the struggle for liberation in Southern Africa. I have sat at the feet of International Brigades veterans from the Spanish Civil War, and supped with King and
Mandela. I have internalized Mandela's insightful observation that "it is the people, not the kings, who make history."

Undoubtedly, some of you have greeted observations and comments that I have made with incredulity, if not outright anger. It takes time to incorporate an understanding of how racist this country is and of the damage that we, as a country, do not only to people in this country but to people world-wide. Courage, like a plant, is something that grows; that needs nourishment-love, care and support.

Lots of people live out their lives like dogs heading for the same old hydrant time after time. Good educators disrupt those patterns and great educators disrupt those patterns greatly. People like Myles Horton, Paulo Freire, belle hooks, Lilian Smith, Irene Brown, Sarah Greenebaum and Maxine Greene challenge students to listen, to feel, to think. They make them think about the world around them; how they fit into that world and their roles and responsibilities in that world. Maxine Greene used to say to her classes regularly: "I must challenge mostly the muffled view, the way routines and methodical systems allow a life of habit and not choice."

I like to close my input into this course quoting from William Ayers' book, City Kids, City Teachers, where the author concludes:

In teaching, as in organizing, you need to be intensely aware of what you value, what you honor, what you stand for. Otherwise you will become the person you now despise. Even with this awareness, the machinery of schooling will work on you like water on rock—it will wear you down, shape you and smooth you. Soon, if you’re not careful, your life will begin to make a mockery of your values. Resisting this fate involves conscious struggle, an attempt to find allies among the students, the parents, the teachers and the citizenry. It requires collective action. It requires wedding your consciousness to your conduct, and it involves taking responsibility for yourself, your work, the world you see and can understand. Mikhail Bakhtin sums up this idea:

What is it that guarantees the internal connection between the elements of personality? Only the unity of responsibility. For what I have experienced and understood,...I answer with my life.

(Ayers,p.327)

Do not despair. Struggle for

In
Our land
Bullets
Are
Beginning
To
Flower.