

BALANCES OF JUSTICE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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About a year ago, William Deresiewicz wrote an article for *The American Scholar* titled “The Disadvantages of an Elite Education.” After two dozen years at Yale and Columbia, where he earned his degrees then taught English for a decade, he one day came to the realization that there were holes in his education. He was 35 years old and had just purchased a house. The pipes needed fixing, which is why he found himself standing in the kitchen with a plumber.

Deresiewicz writes, “There he was, a short, beefy guy with a goatee and a Red Sox cap and a thick Boston accent, and I suddenly learned that I didn’t have the slightest idea what to say to someone like him. So alien was his experience to me, so unguessable his values, so mysterious his very language, that I couldn’t succeed in engaging him in a few minutes of small talk before he got down to work. Fourteen years of higher education and a handful of Ivy League degrees, and there I was, stiff and stupid, struck dumb by my own dumbness.”

The first disadvantage of an elite education, he realized, is that it makes you comfortable around people like you and uncomfortable around everyone else. This is a matter not of race but of class: at elite institutions, white children of businesspeople and professionals happily study alongside the children of black, Asian, and Latino businesspeople and professionals. What none of these students are taught, Deresiewicz says, is to relate to people who are smart in other ways, or who aren’t smart at all. A humanistic education should connect you with all things human, not alienate you from most of humanity.

The second disadvantage of an elite education, related to the first, is that it promotes a false sense of self worth. The message to students at elite institutions is this: because you had the grades and test scores and connections to get in, you deserve more than those who didn’t. One of the great errors of an elite education, Deresiewicz says, “is that it teaches you to think that measures of intelligence and academic achievement are measures of value in some moral or metaphysical sense.” But they’re not, he says. “Graduates of elite schools are not more valuable than stupid people, or talentless people, or even lazy people. Their pain does not hurt more. Their souls do not weigh more. If I were religious, I would say, God does not love them more.”

I agree with this statement, especially standing in this place where we profess that we are all God’s children—and that the family of God extends to all humanity, without exception. Yet some of the issues faced by elite academic institutions confront us as well. Demographically speaking, Unitarian Universalists rank second among religious traditions in the U.S. in average household income (Jews are first) and second in average household education (Hindus are first). For this reason, diversity has been a tough nut to crack for many Unitarian Universalist congregations, including ours.

I value diversity within our congregation. The character of our congregational life depends on having people among us who don't have a string of degrees from elite institutions, or perhaps don't have any degrees at all. There are many ways of denoting value. The character of our congregation also depends on having people among us who don't have a diversified stock portfolio, or perhaps don't own stocks at all. There are many ways of defining wealth. And the character of our congregation depends on having people among us who don't instinctively turn left when walking down the political aisle. There are many ways of applying theological commitments to our common life as a nation.

As with most sermons, the principle audience for this sermon is the preacher. I need to remind myself of my role as your minister and our character as a congregation. To be sure, I know well the world of Deresiewicz's plumber. My father never finished high school (though he did earn his GED many years later), and my mother completed less than one year of college. When I turned 16, my parents gave me a used 1967 Ford Mustang (an awesome car, I'm compelled to add), and they told me I was on my own. If I wanted to go to college, that was fine with them, but I had to make that decision for myself. I also had to pay the tuition.

Although my dad has been a minister in the Mennonite church for more than fifty years, he has made his living first as a farmer, then as a cabinetmaker, and, after we moved to south Arkansas, as a contractor. I know the world of plumbers and electricians. I paid for much of college, and seminary, and graduate school by working on one of my dad's construction crews or, for a couple of summers, on a painting crew of my own. In fact, I was helping to put a new roof on a house in Arkansas one summer after college, when mom came clambering up the extension ladder bearing a letter addressed to me. It was from Harvard, offering me admission to the Divinity School.

These days, when I point out in conversation that I'm only the tenth senior minister of All Souls in nearly two centuries, I sometimes note that I'm the first who does not have a degree from Harvard. I often can't resist adding, however, that I was admitted to Harvard, but chose instead to go to Princeton for seminary and the University of Chicago for my PhD. It's a roundabout way of saying that maybe I belong. Maybe I'm part of the club after all. As a blue-collar kid from the back woods of south Arkansas, I still look at my string of degrees with a certain sense of awe and befuddlement. And sometimes I still wonder whether I really belong.

Maybe it's because I entered the club through the back door: I started my elite education late and made it happen on my own. Or maybe it's because I'm just as comfortable talking amperage as I am iambic pentameter. Whatever the reason, my ambivalence about whether I'm part of the club is a good thing; and it's a feeling I need to foster, as do we all—no matter the nature of our club or the rules for belonging.

The point of education, after all, is to enable students to view their lives, as well as their social and political circumstances, from the outside. As Deresiewicz puts it bluntly, "the true purpose of education is to make minds, not careers." Elite schools, he says, "speak of training leaders, not thinkers—holders of power, not its critics." There's nothing wrong, of course, with learning the skills necessary to excel at a profession. But that's not the main purpose of educating the intellect. Deresiewicz provocatively describes the third and most pernicious disadvantage of an elite education with a terse teaser on the cover of the magazine: "Why Ivy Leaguers Can't Think."

Deresiewicz writes, “Being an intellectual begins with thinking your way outside of your assumptions and the system that enforces them. But students who get into elite schools are precisely the ones who have best learned to work within the system, so it’s almost impossible for them to see outside it, to see that it’s even there.” He goes on to remind us that “since the idea of the intellectual emerged in the 18th century, it has had, at its core, a commitment to social transformation. Being an intellectual means thinking your way toward a vision of the good society and then trying to realize that vision by speaking truth to power.” This “takes more than just intellect: it takes imagination and courage.”

As an example of imagination and courage, Deresiewicz mentions in passing John Ruskin, the most influential art critic in England during the last half of the 19th century. Ruskin also wrote several essays on economics and politics, which are less well known today than they should be.

Ruskin observed with alarm one aspect of Adam Smith and J.S. Mill’s early writings on free-market capitalism. These political economists, as they were called, argued that the law of supply and demand and the law of self interest were laws of nature, and thus could not be regulated by governments. As a result, a certain portion of the population was destined to be poor. The government’s responsibility was to create favorable conditions for market forces and to curtail the numbers of the burgeoning poor through population control.

Ruskin, imaginatively and courageously, challenged these arguments. In a book of essays titled *Unto the Last*, he argued that it was the government’s responsibility to educate, at public expense, the nation’s children and youth in three areas: the laws of health, the habits of gentleness and justice, and the skills of a profession. He also argued that the government, in its own factories and shops, should produce all products considered basic necessities for living—an even more expansive public option than our President recently proposed. Private industry could produce these goods as well, of course; but it was the government’s role to ensure that poor people could afford basic necessities. Further, Ruskin argued that the government was responsible to retrain the unemployed and to provide for the old and the destitute.

The main problem with the free-market economy, Ruskin concluded, was that it was governed strictly by what he called balances of expediency: whatever would earn the greatest profit. But expediency must have a counterpart, which Ruskin identified as justice. “For no human actions ever were intended by the maker of humanity to be guided by balances of expediency,” Ruskin insisted, “but by balances of justice.”

Where have you gone, John Ruskin? My fervent hope is that he’s gone to church: that he lives and breathes in the symmetry of these walls and in the passions of those of us gathered here. In a world where structures of power tend to be self-replicating and self-protecting, religious communities like All Souls must be places of imagination and courage. As we gather here, we seek to renew our sense of what is sacred and true, and in so doing to recommit ourselves to the work of transforming our own lives and our world. Transformation is our goal: lives of greater integrity and purpose as individuals, systems of greater fairness and justice as a nation.

For the record, I think it is morally indefensible—not to mention economically foolish—that we as a nation have committed to educating our children at public expenses, but not to keeping them healthy. No wonder our life expectancy as Americans

ranks 50th among the world's nation—unless you survive to age 65, when the public option kicks in. We rank 10th among nations for life expectancy at age 65.

Make no mistake: I'm not asking us to forgo expediency altogether. Many of us here today make a living in the healthcare economy as it now stands, my wife included. The necessities of expediency confront us at every turn and insistently demand our fealty.

But so do the necessities of justice. In their new book titled *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn tell about the time some years ago when the U.S. withheld its funding for the United Nations Family Planning Association—a sum of \$34 million. A retired French teacher from California decided to get involved. She wrote a letter to her local paper pointing out that a week had passed since the cuts, with little public reaction. “Ho Hum,” she wrote, “This is vacation time. Columnists have written about it and newspapers printed editorials of lament. Ho Hum. More women die in childbirth in a few days than terrorism kills people in a year. Ho Hum. Some little girl is having her genitals cut with a cactus needle. Ho Hum, that's just a cultural thing.”

She closed the letter, “An an exercise in outraged democracy, would 34 million of my fellow citizens please join me in sending one dollar each to the US Committee for the UNFPA? That would right a terrible wrong... and drown out the Ho Hums.”

A grandmother in New Mexico had a similar idea. She started a chain letter also asking people to send in a dollar. The two eventually joined forces. By the time federal funding was restored, they had raised \$4 million. They had also started an organization uniting people around the country on behalf of women worldwide. They helped drown out the Ho Hums.

My obligation as your minister, and our collective obligation as a community of faith, is to speak up for people among and around us who stand outside the circles of belonging and power. As people of faith, we are called to think beyond expediency in order to right the balances of justice. “What does God require of us?” the Hebrew prophet Micah asks. “Only that we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.”

When you see a tragedy or a travesty, become an intellectual in the oldest and best sense of that term. Set your mind to figuring out how to respond, and your heart will surely follow. You'll not only help save a suffering world, you'll redeem your own soul as well. No more Ho Hums. Only imagination and courage.