

Education in Peril©  
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet  
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As Linda just informed us, three of the four readings she shared were by Unitarians. Each of these three Unitarians held positions of significance, either for this nation, or for the state in which they lived. Thomas Jefferson was both a founding father of this country as well as the third President of the United States. Horace Mann was the first Secretary of Education for the state of Massachusetts. Only one other state preceded Massachusetts in establishing a State Board of Education. Because of this, Horace Mann had a profound influence not just on the development of public schools in Massachusetts, but also on the development of public education in our country. And James Russell Lowell, a poet, editor, and U.S. diplomat, was expressing his thoughts about the importance of education shortly after the end of the Civil War. A time when this country was experiencing ongoing and significant division.

The statements by these three men make it clear that education has been a topic of importance to our religious forebears in this country since its inception. And even before any of these men were born, education was being championed by another famous Unitarian, the English philosopher John Locke. In 1693 Locke published his treatise titled, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. This treatise was one of the foundational texts on educational theory in the 18th & 19th centuries. In his treatise Locke asserted that education has a powerful influence not just on the development of a person's knowledge, but also on their character. Because of this, education was important not just to the individual but to the larger community that individual was a part of.

Some of you may be wondering why, when my sermon topic is "Education in Peril," I am sharing this historical information with you. Here is the reason. I realize that a few of you may be questioning how my topic this morning deserves to be addressed in a sermon. My hope is that the words of our forebears provides the foundation for the answer to that question. These forebears recognized the significance of education to each of us as individuals, to the cause of freedom, and to the establishment and maintenance of a democracy. Looking to our Seven Principles, we can see that each of these three issues, personal development, freedom, and democracy, are found there. We find them in our Fourth and Fifth Principles. Our Fourth Principle, "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning," speaks primarily to personal development. Our Fifth Principle "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large," speaks to freedom in the right of conscience, and to democracy in the last portion of the statement. As Unitarian Universalists then, we are called to affirm and promote what is needed for personal development, freedom and democracy to flourish.

I want to shift my focus now to how education in our country today is in peril. Those of you who are educators have probably been following recent developments that are indicators of the peril education is in. In fact, I would guess some of you will come up to me after the sermon to let me know what I neglected to mention. I look forward to those conversations. I appreciate opportunities to continue my own education.

If you have been following the news about education of late, you have likely heard about recent teacher strikes in California, Denver, Colorado, Oklahoma, & West Virginia. Along with these teacher strikes there have also been other states where strikes were barely avoided. The fact that there have been so many teacher strikes and near strikes over the course of the past year is one indication that education is in peril across our country.

As is typically the case, one of the issues in all of the teacher strikes in the states just mentioned was teacher pay. Teacher pay has been a contentious issue for many years. It isn't a new topic or a new area of peril for education. Teacher pay has been putting public schools and school districts in peril for decades. Many people view teacher pay rates as simply a local issue, but it is more than that. It can seem like a local issue because typically teacher strikes are in specific communities, often communities where the local tax base is simply insufficient to support education at the level it deserves. But more recently, teachers in places like West Virginia, Oklahoma and Tennessee have demonstrated that entire states have been providing inadequate funding for the education of their children. And these states have underfunded education because of two slogans we have been hearing now for decades. The first is "less government," and the second is "lower taxes." I want to be clear here, I am not asserting here that we should allow our government or our taxes to grow at rates which are excessive or unnecessary. That said, without an adequate and appropriate level of government, our country will cease to function. And in regards to the cry for "lower taxes," I recall what I was told by a supervisor early in my social work career. He told me "there is no such thing as a free lunch." If we are going to have things such as public education, public roads, public lands or public services, we, the public, are going to have to pay for them or else they will no longer exist. So the massive tax cuts, especially the cuts for the ultra wealthy, threaten our educational systems and much more.

But teacher pay wasn't the only issue on the table in most of the recent strikes. Other important issues were also being raised—issues such as class size, having necessary support staff such as school counselors and nurses, and providing basic and necessary learning materials. These kinds of issues often get glossed over by those who are spouting the slogans of "less government" and "lower taxes." These issues need to be not only noticed by, but also lifted up by, all of us. These are the issues that let us know what really matters, namely, providing the best education that is possible to the children of our country—to the children of our entire country. With the significant number of educators we have in this Fellowship I am sure I am preaching to the choir here. For those of us who aren't professional educators though, we need to strive to become educated on the issues I am raising here, and then we need to inform others of what we learn. We need to be the advocates for the children who are being deprived of the education they need and the education they deserve. As John Dewey so eloquently wrote over one hundred years ago; "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy." Education and democracy are in peril today.

As I mentioned earlier, the recent teacher strikes are one indicator of the peril education is currently in. But there are other indicators as well. Some of you may be

aware that there has been a concerted effort over the past decade or more to divert funding from public schools. Under the guise of “school choice” there has been a push to shift public schools money to other types of schools, including charter schools and private schools, even private schools that are religiously affiliated and have religious curriculum. The latest such push is coming from the current U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos. That push is in the form of a bill sponsored by Senator Ted Cruz, of Texas. The bill is known as the “Education Freedom Scholarships and Opportunity Act.” If passed into law, this bill would provide a federal tax credit, on a dollar for dollar basis up to five billion dollars, for those who donate to nonprofit scholarship funds. These scholarships would be used for elementary and secondary education as well as secondary and post-secondary workforce training. Senator Cruz asserts that this bill will stimulate investment in education. That sounds great until you look more closely at what the real purpose of this bill is. This is another “cut taxes” bill. And whose taxes are going to be cut? Not the taxes of most middle class or working class people in this country. Those who will benefit will need to have a high enough income level to be able to claim such tax deductions. I can tell you that Secretary DeVos is not looking out for all children when she is supporting this bill. I say this because I know her track record in the Kalamazoo, Michigan, area where I lived just before moving here to be your minister. Secretary DeVos’ focus, first and foremost, has been and continues to be to provide freedom of education for the few, not to provide appropriate and adequate education for the many. This bill is being touted as a way to increase money for education. The fact is, taking another five billion dollars out of the money that comes into the U.S. Treasury means that at some point government services will need to be cut. If I was a betting man, I would wager that in the not-too-distant future it would come out of public education funds. It seems quite clear to me that this bill is one more example of the “less government” mantra.

Education, and by that I am referring to public education, is in peril. It is in peril because there are a significant number of people currently in positions of power and authority who do not agree with the statements contained in our reading this morning. The crisis in this country, if there is one, is not at our border with Mexico. We don’t need to waste five billion dollars there. The crisis is in the classrooms of the poverty stricken communities of our large urban areas. It is in the classrooms of our rural areas where few people are at or above the average median income. Those are the places we need to be investing our money, our time, and our efforts. If the perspectives on education of Jefferson, Mann, Lowell and Dewey are going to flourish in this country, people like us will need to speak up, and maybe even act out, in support of public education for all children. And let me be clear here, I am not talking about the kind of public education we have currently. The current situation in many public schools is woefully inadequate. That is obvious when you consider the multiple teacher strikes over the course of the past twelve months. Teachers should never have to go on strike to demand adequate pay, appropriate levels of staffing, or basic and necessary teaching supplies and resources. A significant portion of our nation’s children deserve better than what we are giving them currently. We can and we must demand more.

I can’t tell you exactly what that “more” will look like or what it ought to be. What will be required will be different in each community and in every state. We need to keep our eyes on the target though—the target of providing the best education we are

capable of to every child. In order to keep our eyes on the target, it would be helpful to have a slogan. The best slogan I have ever seen on this topic was on a bumper sticker I saw years ago. I can't quote the statement exactly but here is my attempt to paraphrase what it said. "It will be a truly great day when public education has the money required to meet the learning needs of our children and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a new bomber." My hope is that many of us will see that great day arrive.

So may it be.