

“A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Waste”
A Sermon Celebrating Black History Month
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When I was in the first grade at Lincoln Elementary School in Anoka, Minnesota, I will always remember the day that a boy named Ted joined our class. I remember because instead of facing the flag as we said the pledge of allegiance as we usually did, every one of us faced the back of the room. We were all staring at Ted. He was the first African American child any of us had ever seen. He came that one day and I don't remember seeing him again. I will always remember how terrified he looked.

What happened to him? What were his options, I wonder, living in that small Scandinavian town? It was the late 1960s, and exciting and terrifying things were happening all over the country – marches, school integration, speeches, famous people getting shot. But for us, these things existed on television - like the Vietnam War and the landing on the moon. Racism was something bad that those “Southern” people did. But that didn't stop us Northern children from staring rudely at a new boy, or from calling each other the n-word. Similar to kids saying something or someone is so “gay” today. Kids know right where the edge is, what will cause the most offense. And this was it, in the midst of the country's awakening and calls for change in regard to race.

Mary McLeod Bethune and Prudence Crandall were part of that awakening for me. I read their biographies when I was in the fifth and sixth grades, and gobbling up everything I could read about strong women, or “Women's libbers” as they would have been called back then. The second wave of feminism was in full swing, and my family thought I was *cute as a button* for admiring them. That they dedicated themselves to the education of people of color – Bethune to lift up her own people, and Crandall because she just couldn't be part of a hateful system, a passive bystander – this went without comment.

I met Mary and Prudence at the library, where I prowled, dreamed, and practically lived in the summertime. Perhaps I noticed them in a display made by

some forward-thinking librarian. But however I found them, they changed me. They did just what books are supposed to do – they lifted my imagination to a larger world. They helped me to understand what it might have been like for Ted, standing friendless and afraid in a group of white children.

Mary McLeod Bethune saw the education that the white children around her had, and it made her angry. She tells this story about being 9 or 10 years old: “My mother kept in close contact with the people she served as a slave – she cooked for them... She kept up these relations. Very often I was taken along to my mother’s job for this family of Wilsons after I was old enough. I went into what they called their play house in the yard where they did their studying. They had pencils, slates, magazines and books. I picked up one of the books, and one of the girls said to me, “You can’t read that – put that down. I will show you some pictures over here,” and when she said to me, “You can’t read that – put that down,” it just did something to my pride and to my heart that made me feel that some day I would read just as she was reading. I looked at her picture book. But I went away from there determined that some day I would master for myself just what they were getting.” The story that we heard earlier, of sweet, young Mary always wanting to read was true. It was probably the one I read as a fifth grader. It was also the story she told when she went out fund-raising for her school – about a cheerful young girl, pulling-herself-up-by-the-bootstraps. Bethune was a pragmatic politician, and she knew what people wanted to hear. No doubt it was true. But this second story, the story of anger, was just as important and true. It’s the story that interests me now.

Pay attention to your anger, my friend Tom says. Your anger is where your hope is. Pay attention to what makes you angry – you are seeing a glimpse of a better world, the one that should be and isn’t now.

Mary McLeod Bethune’s anger over what white children had and black children didn’t served her throughout her life. The phrase, “Put that down – you can’t read” spurred her not only to read but to work to keep other children from ever having to hear it. Her school became a high school, and eventually a college, and Bethune-Cookman college is thriving today. Her anger served her when she drove for miles with a sick student to a white hospital that refused to treat her. She founded a hospital for African Americans. It served her as she went around the country lecturing about the importance of black education. President Roosevelt hired her to serve on his education department in the 1930s. Mary McLeod

Bethune was important to me because she had the gift of taking her anger and channeling it in a forceful, positive direction.

Prudence Crandall was also angry. She came to love Sarah Harris, her first black student. When she saw how bright and hard-working she was, it must have become harder and harder to have patience with the parents of her other girls. I was talking with Jenn Phillips about this story, and I think Jenn captured her sentiments when she said, “Oh, I’m sorry you’re offended by the presence of a black student. I’m going to shut my school down and have all black students.” I mean, who does this? Someone who is angry. Prudence Crandall was important to me because she was the first white person I had ever heard of who got angry about racism. Angry enough to consider it her own problem. In 1833.

I have long wanted more people to hear Prudence Crandall’s story. She found students for her school by placing an ad in “The Liberator”, a national abolitionist newspaper, and obtaining introductions to black families with means, who might be interested in sending their daughters to her. Of course, you don’t just write someone a letter and expect them to ship off their child, so she traveled by stage coach from Canterbury to Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Providence to meet them in person.

As she was planning all this, however, powerful men in her town started organizing. They held town meetings to stir up hostility. As her story was being reported in “The Liberator”, she attracted the attention of a Rev. Samuel May, a Unitarian minister serving in Norwell, Mass. May wrote her a letter of admiration, saying, *If there’s anything I can do...* She wrote him back immediately and said, *As a matter of fact...* Women of her day were not allowed to speak at public meetings. They couldn’t even attend them. May was a tremendous ally, it turned out. He did not offer unsolicited advice or try to take over. He said, basically, “Tell me what you want me to say, and I’ll say it” – not very common, I’d guess, for a man of his time. At the town meeting, he was instantly labeled as an “outsider” and not allowed to speak. He caught people afterwards, though, and talked to anyone who’d listen. But her opposition grew stronger.

They organized town merchants not to sell her supplies for her school. They kept up a steady stream of taunts and harassment whenever she and her young boarders went outside. Some of them were lawyers, and they even created a special law, known as the Black law, that prohibited African Americans from other states from entering Connecticut for education. All of this just seemed to make her calmer. Crandall was actually tried and jailed, and the jailing of a respected, white,

upper class lady brought sympathy and support from everywhere. When her enemies' more "civilized" tactics failed, they organized a night raid on her school, throwing rocks at the windows, and setting the place on fire. The flames were put out before they reached the girls in their rooms. But Prudence realized that she was putting her students in more danger than she could conscience. With a heavy heart, she closed her school, and moved away.

The Canterbury Female Boarding School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color ran for just two years. But not before those girls – there were about 20 pupils altogether - could catch a glimpse of what was possible in themselves. Some became teachers and school principals, and their children became teachers. Sarah Harris, her first student, became an abolitionist in Rhode Island who worked for the underground railroad.

Prudence and Mary were the strong women I wanted to be like, women who helped me imagine myself and the world differently. They were women whose anger changed things. In addition to being reformers and teachers, both women were persuasive saleswomen with a moral product: a conscience. Specifically, a conscience that told you to care about other people's children. I believe that this is what they have to ask us today: Do we care about other people's children? Do we care enough to be angry?

I can recommend a film that will likely make you angry – as well as sad and hopeful. It's a documentary called "Waiting for Superman", and it's about education for our country's poorest children, a group that still overlaps significantly with our country's African American children. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the barrier to education was unambiguously race. Today, the issues of class and race are maddeningly intertwined. If you are a black parent, you can send your child to Harvard. Rising enrollment of black students at Harvard and other Ivy League schools is heartening. But you have to have the money. And you have to have had it since your child was born, in order to send him or her to a "good school".

Lincoln Elementary was an average school, by anyone's standards, nothing impressive. Some years I had a wonderful, inspiring teacher, other years, not so much. But even if the highs weren't anything great – this was before the concept of gifted and talented classes – the lows were decent. We learned what we needed to succeed in the next grades. The playing field was level across class, if not across race. In my town, you either went to parochial school if you were Catholic, or to Lincoln if you were not. That went for doctors' and lawyers' kids, as well as

the children of teachers like my dad, and janitors, like my uncle. Nobody talked about getting into a “good school”. There were just two choices, religious and secular.

Now more than at any other time in our history, attending college is the only way to have any semblance of security or a promising life. For persons of any race. The percentages of people who have kept or found other jobs in our difficult economy are much, much higher when they have a bachelors degree or higher. But black students still have more difficulty entering and completing college than white students. Amy Stuart Wells, a professor of sociology and education says that this is black students are more likely to attend segregated schools with high concentration of poverty, less qualified teachers, lower expectations and a less demanding curriculum.

These factors tend to have a cumulative effect, according to Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Success Academy, one of the most successful inner city charter schools. Between grades five and seven, Canada says, the test scores of minority students sharply decline. So if you’re ten, he says, and you are a pretty good student, by the time you’re 11 you can become a C student, and by the time you’re 12, you might be getting Ds. There are two possible reasons for this, Canada says. Either you are getting stupider, or your school is failing you. It’s a cumulative effect of years of poor teaching, not preparing you for the lessons that are being put in front of you now. Even for those who beat all these odds, according to Amy Stuart Wells, there is prejudice on college boards who know that your school has not exposed you to the same kinds of classes that the better schools have.

The most hopeful movement in education today, some say, is charter schools being developed in the inner cities. Their quality is far from universal, but because they are not bound by the same restrictions as the public schools, they are showing great promise. There are some spectacular successes. Geoffrey Canada not only started a charter school, but created a program that stayed with a child from birth to the completion of college. They, like many charter schools, have ramped up what I would hated as a child. Longer school days. School in the summer. Pressure to make good grades and achieve. But these things are important – and in the case of the Harlem Academy for Success, their kids not only do better on test scores than other poor or minority children, they do better than every body. EVERYBODY.

So how do you get into one of these? By lottery. The five families interviewed in “Waiting for Superman” were all entered in lotteries. They hoped

to enter a charter school, like Canada's in Harlem, or one of the Kipp Schools (which stands for "knowledge is power"). As they listened to the names being called, their faces were full of fear and hope, knowing their child's future hung in the balance. As you come to love each of these children in the film, as you come to hope their hopes and dream their dreams, you can feel your heart break when they – most of them – do not get in. It is easier to accept the faceless millions who are getting a terrible education than to look at them.

The film maker of "Waiting for Superman" spoke of his passion for public schools and the right of every child to a high quality education. And, he said, that he passes three public schools every day as he drives his children to their private school. The quality of schools since the 1960s and 1970s nationally has declined to the point where he was afraid to take what he called the "leap of faith". I know more parents who have expressed this gap in heart-breaking terms. "I believe in public education," my friend Phyllis once said to me. "And my children have one shot. One. We were lucky enough to have a choice."

Let me be clear: I do not blame any parent for making this choice. Ever. I might make that choice myself, if the public schools near me were doing badly. There has to be a way for us to care about and take care of everyone's children. This is the challenge to the comfortable, which by and large, Unitarian Universalists of all races tend to be – educated, comfortable, or proportionately more so than the average. This is the dilemma of anyone who has what other people don't have, and still wants to care for the world. To keep our anger and our care alive.

We need to invest in our children – all of our children – by supporting charter schools, so there are more good opportunities for children. We also have to support public schools and hold them accountable. We who are proud that our Delaware public schools have won the coveted "Race to the Top" funding must watch our schools, support our schools, and care that they live up to their potential. We have to know more stories, and allow our hearts to break more often. We have to have more heroes and heroines, people like Geoffrey Canada, like Prudence Crandall, like Mary McLeod Bethune. They have shown us what is possible – in themselves and in the world. Let us not give up on anybody, or allow them to give up on themselves. A mind is a terrible thing to waste. And a precious gift to give to the world. Amen.

Postscript: After this sermon, I had many educators approach me, full of passion and insight about our public school system and charter schools. Clearly we need a lot more conversation about this topic. I hope we have it.