



the center for **spiritual**
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Connections

Addressing Issues of Sexual Identity: The Lessons We Learned

by Neal Brown

What We Did

In hindsight, we should not have been surprised. Last April our Middle School planned a morning “Day of Action” focused on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people within our school and greater community. We invited guests to present their stories to students in grades 5-8; presenters included teachers, non-teaching staff members, a parent, a board member, the daughter of a teacher, and local gay and lesbian high school students. The workshops included middle school-level discussions on topics like “Discrimination in the Workplace,” “Coming Out to Other School Parents,” “Ways Words Hurt,” and “What It’s Like to Be a Gay Teenager.” We sent notes to parents several weeks in advance explaining the purpose of the two-hour sessions.

Our Day of Action was conceived a few years ago by students who had grown hungry for a more interactive and educational experience than the “day of silence” practiced at our school and hundreds of others around the country. Ours is a community steeped in progressive education and founded on core tenets of inclusion, acceptance, and service to others. In fact, when we opened our doors in the 1930s, Green Acres was the first racially integrated school in Montgomery County, Maryland. To say the least, diversity is not exactly a newfangled topic here.

In the time leading up to the day itself, questions arose from some parents; a number came to speak with our Middle School Head. Conversations focused on whether our Day of Action was age-appropriate, sufficiently relevant to our children’s experiences, and/or worth the time taken (two class periods!) from the normal slate of morning classes. Some worried that their children, par-

ticularly the fifth graders, weren’t ready to be exposed to the topics and speakers. Others objected to the sexual nature of the presentations, an egregious misreading of the agenda that nonetheless substantiated adults’ ongoing discomfort with the general topic. (In fact, we had gone out of our way to explain that the topic was not sexual in any way.) We listened and respected the concerns parents brought to us, but, in the end, we were surprised that a number of families kept their children home. Some told us that they intended to do this; others did so without discussion or explanation. It was a practice nearly unheard of in our school community, and it suggested to us that parents who are normally willing to trust the school’s judgment found this topic more threatening than we had anticipated.

Why We Did It

Among families, choosing Green Acres—and other schools like ours—is generally an affirmative decision. Perhaps that explains our assumption that everyone in our community understood the centrality of LGBT issues to our school’s mission of inclusion and trusted that we would address these issues with sensitivity and care. We assumed that we had communicated and listened to our families with enough clarity and attention. We assumed that the vast preponderance of our community felt as strongly as we did about what seems to many of us to be the key civil rights issue of our time—the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people to full acceptance and citizenship. We assumed that most if not all of our families understood the critical role that primary

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Gender Inclusivity: Suggestions for School Improvement

Gender is all around us. We define, interpret, distinguish. Gender is how we perceive ourselves. While we express our internal sense of gender by external behaviors, our internal sense is not always visible to others. People's gender identity is not synonymous with their biological sex. We cannot assign gender for others. Gender as a binary, two-option system—you are either this, or that—is both outdated and insufficient.

Some individuals do not immediately identify with male or female, some identify with a gender that does not match their biological sex, and some may think of themselves as neither. Children whose gender identity does not match their biological sex, or who are gender non-conforming in asserting their gender, are not necessarily “confused.” Rather they are using external expressions to match their internal perceptions of themselves.

In the binary model of gender distinction—the model that is presently embraced and rewarded in our culture—an individual has two options: male or female. This seems to work well for a large majority of us. The problem is that not all of us are in the majority. Where gender is seen as a spectrum that includes, but is not limited to, male or female, individuals can express the attributes of either or both simultaneously and value the attributes that make them distinct regardless of the sexual characteristics they were perceived to have at birth.

Embracing the idea that gender occupies a spectrum rather than either/or—while also acknowledging that gender identity can be fluid as easily as it can be static—is a first step toward accepting the whole child and every child. Sadly, because gender is too often “policed” within the binary framework, those who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming, or those who exhibit gender variance, are frequently disenfranchised and targeted by bullying.

We needn't look far to find staggering statistics that attest to the violence and harassment of children who do not conform to the gender binary. In the 2009 GLSEN School Climate Survey, nearly one third of students surveyed said that they felt unsafe in their schools because of their gender expression.

This harassment represents traumatic experiences; children's cognitive experience with trauma involves a disruption to their cherished beliefs about both their world and their self. For a child who is already experiencing disenfranchisement and who

lacks the same access to resources and decision-making freedom that an adult has, traumatic experiences such as these can cause a massive disruption to confidence in self, others, and even the value of life. These experiences cause chronic traumas which result in the presentation of integrated adaptive mechanisms, which are typically negative and maladapted to living a stable and functional life.

As educators concerned with social justice, we must use our awareness of trauma as a framework to understand the child's grief response, and we must work to create climates in our schools, and elsewhere, in which gender non-conforming or trans-identified students will not be oppressed.

One way to begin is by establishing a policy of inclusivity. We must also identify gender-charged areas such as bathrooms and locker rooms and remove barriers to children who do not fit within the gender binary. We must honor children's chosen pronouns and do our own work to use them consistently. We must partner with parents, service providers, and community allies to provide wrap-around support for these children and their families. We must send a clear message that harassment and “gender policing” will not be tolerated. We must develop age-appropriate models through which to intervene and resolve situations that compromise the safety of gender non-conforming students.

We must honor every child by recognizing and validating the whole person within that child, and challenge those practices, language, forms, activities, and zones that reduce children to invisibility. Through these actions we can begin to honor and promote pro-social behaviors among all children and model a paradigm shift that will ideally spread beyond the classroom and into the wider community where someday it will find a comfortable home. ●

Source:

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E.A., Diaz, E. M., Bartkiewicz, M.J. Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network. (2009). The 2003 national school climate survey; Executive Summary: Key Findings on the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools. New York, NY: GLSEN.

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and secondary schools can and must play in removing discrimination and intimidation from the lives of LGBT people, especially young LGBT people. And we assumed that parents would trust our decisions about what is age-appropriate.

Facts about the plight of LGBT youth are available for anyone to gather. Bigotry takes a disgraceful and disturbing toll, even in 2010. The 2009 National School Climate Survey found that nearly 9 out of 10 LGBT students experience harassment in school. They are much more likely than non-LGBT students to be threatened or injured with a weapon, and over two thirds of those surveyed in Connecticut and New York reported hearing homophobic comments such as “faggot” and “dyke.” Close to 85% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 40% reported being harassed physically, and almost 19% reported being physically assaulted in school this past year due to their sexual orientation. As a result, LGBT students are much more likely to skip school out of fear, to become pregnant or get someone pregnant, to demonstrate depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, and to attempt suicide. An astonishing 30% of LGBT teenagers attempt suicide. Tragically, this past September, six teenage boys in the U.S. took their own lives, due at least in part to homophobic bullying.

And while in the past ten years GLSEN reports “a decreasing trend in the frequency of hearing homophobic remarks...LGBT students’ experiences with more severe forms of bullying and harassment have remained relatively constant.” For educators invested in the well-being and future of young people, this is particularly disheartening news. We can only imagine the outcry if girls, or African-Americans, or any other group faced such daunting statistics; it demonstrates that our work is far from done, and that addressing anti-gay bias should be at the top of our list of priorities. (All of the foregoing quotations and statistics are available from glsen.org.)

Having the will to do this work is one thing and it counts for a lot. My school’s recent experience with the Day of Action, however, suggests that knowing what to do is far from obvious, and may not be greeted as enthusiastically as one would hope. While I have no more expertise than any other school leader, what I now recognize more fully is that sexual orientation and gender identity are topics not easily addressed, even under the best of circumstances. They often touch the three dinner-party “untouchables”: religion, politics, and sex. We must remember,

though, that while different faiths present various views on homosexuality, none condones the types of verbal and physical abuse faced by LGBT youth. Similarly, while gay marriage and “don’t ask, don’t tell” are hotly contested political issues, no political party in this country supports anti-gay bullying. As for sex, respectful treatment of LGBT youth and adults has little, if anything, to do with sexual behavior. It would be equally inappropriate to talk about the specifics of heterosexual sex as it would to discuss homosexual sex in school settings outside of health classes and advisories. While addressing anti-gay discrimination has been considered “best practice” in many schools for over a decade, doing so remains under assault today.

This sensitivity of the issue has taught us to tread more delicately and to communicate with greater care. It also has encouraged us to question assumptions, not only about the readiness of parents to accept LGBT issues as part of the curriculum, but also about the readiness of teachers to engage in this vital work. With these thoughts in mind, I share some lessons that I have learned that might help other school leaders grappling with these issues.

What We Learned: Communication and Curriculum

It is the job of trustees, school board members, administrators, and teachers to communicate a school or school system’s commitment to LGBT anti-bias work. This includes overt messages in writing—non-discrimination policies, diversity statements, and curriculum statements—as well as reminders at back-to-school nights and other community gatherings where mission and program are discussed. Parents need to understand what your school stands for and the ways your mission is actualized by all aspects of the curriculum, including the diversity curriculum. It is a deficient diversity program that includes and protects the rights of some people but not others.

At our school this year, we are codifying a separate diversity curriculum that will delineate the diversity-related concepts and topics introduced and/or reinforced at each grade, K-8. This exercise provides clarity for parents about when and if sensitive diversity topics will arise, including LGBT issues. A published diversity curriculum is not a means for asking parents’ “permission” to teach a given topic; to the contrary, it sets expectations and offers forewarning so that communicating with parents as each topic is introduced becomes unnecessary. If we believe that teaching about fairness and diversity issues (including LGBT issues) is important, perhaps as important as teaching math or science, then we should accord it the same level of importance by including it in our written curriculum.

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What We Learned: Professional Development and Accountability

Developing and sharing with the community a diversity curriculum is also, in itself, an act of professional development. The process ideally engages teachers in a discussion about the diversity topics most critical to be taught at each grade. In doing so, it unearths teachers' levels of comfort (or discomfort) with LGBT topics and other issues, and it sets the stage for continuing professional development devoted to diversity concerns. A diversity curriculum also helps to hold teachers accountable. If the first grade curriculum states that we introduce the variety of family structures, including those with two mommies or two daddies, then first-grade teachers know that this is an expectation of them. In the same way that a teacher cannot choose to ignore the first-grade math curriculum, he or she must teach the first-grade diversity curriculum.

Of course doing so may require additional training and support. Ongoing whole-faculty meeting time devoted to discussions of diversity topics is essential. Last year, we formed a SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) group for staff. The group meets monthly to develop a deeper understanding of diversity concepts, to reflect on personal beliefs, and to consider how this learning affects what happens in the classroom. I have learned that one can never do enough of this training, even if the benefits are not always immediately apparent. It is essential, at a minimum, that every teacher understands the experiences of LGBT youth. As school administrators, part of our role is to promote the adult learning and growth necessary to teach. Nowhere does this seem more valuable than in the area of diversity and LGBT issues.

What We Learned: Parent Education

Parents also need to be educated, to be heard, and to be developed as spokespersons for your school. We should take any opportunity to invite parents to hear a diversity-related speaker. This fall, we began a SEED group for parents. With fifteen participants this year, and roughly the same number each year ahead, we envision a cadre of parents who have considered and understand diversity at a deeper level. These are the parents who will speak up when the going gets rough, when other parents may not understand the link between a school's mission and its introduction of an event such as the Day of Action.

What We Learned: Community

Students need to hear (and see) these messages more than anyone. They need to know that school is a safe place to be oneself, LGBT or not—that treating one another with respect is paramount. Yet simply hearing these messages is not enough. Students have to see books and other materials that include LGBT themes or characters displayed in the library and classrooms, gay and lesbian couples embraced by the community, and the comfort the community has with LGBT faculty, staff, and alumni. And they have to see and hear these issues addressed in their classes, assemblies, and advisory periods—by adults. While we have a long way to go to understand ways we can broaden inclusion, I have learned that “walking the walk” means raising LGBT issues intentionally rather than maintaining a silent anti-bias stance. When we don't say anything about LGBT individuals and families, we convey the message that diversity issues are important for some groups, but that others are unworthy of our respect and attention—a perverse view of diversity indeed. Similarly, when we fail to make our schools welcoming and affirming places for LGBT teachers and other staff members, then everyone loses. These adults are less likely to come out to the community—and thus unable to serve as positive LGBT role models for students and for the community as a whole. As one colleague explained to me, an unsafe school becomes a “triple loss”—for the LGBT staff member(s), for the students, and for the community.

As educators, we share a commitment to the future of each of our students. We know as well that changing attitudes and behaviors takes time; thus every day that we as school leaders and teachers wait costs our students, both those who are or may be LGBT and those who are forming beliefs which they will carry forward into adulthood. As racism has infected the minds and self-esteem of generations of Americans, so too has anti-gay bias cast a pall over the future of the children in schools. It is hard for me to imagine a more pressing ethical issue for our schools today. ●

Neal Brown is Head of School at Green Acres School in Rockville, Maryland. He was assisted in this article by Middle School Head Peter Braverman and Middle School teacher and service learning coordinator Adriana Murphy.



In my first year of teaching high school, I agreed to be a chaperone on a World War II history trip across Europe for students over spring break. We took 32 students and (no small victory) we brought all 32 back. I had never counted to 32 so many times in my life.

Looking back, that entire trip was my baptism by fire in being a shepherd of young people. I am convinced that of all the gray hairs I have now, the first one must have been born on that trip. But there was wisdom born as well. And one minute-and-a-half portion of that trip made me wiser than most entire years of my life.

Among the sights we visited in England, France, and Germany, we stopped for two hours at a concentration camp. We chose Dachau, the first camp in the Holocaust. This camp is unique for many reasons, but among them is that it was where many religious leaders from a wide range of traditions were sent, enslaved, and many killed.

At the end of the tour, we were shown that many religions have been given small plots of land within the grounds of the camp to erect memorials to their religious members lost. There is a long strip of gravel road along which you can see or enter small, one-room chapels, ornate shrines, or even churches with rooms large enough for worship services. There is even a Catholic convent where a brave and prayerful group of religious people are cloistered for life, praying around the clock for an end to bigotry, hatred, and war.

Most of my students had gone ahead of me on the gravel road of religious memorials. I had taken my familiar place at the end of the group to herd the stragglers. Honestly, I had not let the extreme horror of the camp enter my own heart. I was doing what teachers do: I was trying to keep the students safe and together, and, in the best-case scenario, help them learn something.

I found myself alone on the gravel road and began to think about what I had just seen. Immediately, a lump formed in my throat and I sobbed audibly for a few seconds until I could gather myself. At least I tried to gather myself, but it didn't work. I was worried that my students would see me out of control, so I ducked into a Presbyterian chapel to have my understandable cry and then find my sheep and count to 32.

I entered the small church through an odd entrance. You had to walk down a descending ramp to the entrance below the ground. When I entered the dark, gray church, I saw a handful of my students near the exit. The church had about a dozen pews and could probably hold about twenty people. I could hear my students whispering but they were far enough away for me to have some privacy.

I stopped at the first pew and sat down for a minute of spiritual renewal. But the pew was hard. It was a slab of imperfect stone. I shifted on it but every inch was rough and bumpy. I looked for a better pew, but all were rough and uncomfortable.

Oh well. I looked around the room for spiritual uplift and saw only cracked walls, raw and random art, an altar that was tilting to one side, and broken candles at all different heights sending their light against the walls that were clearly uneven. In fact, the roof of the room wasn't even the same height at different places. As I remember, no two walls were the same color and no color was anything I could name.

I was appalled. An angry voice in my head was protesting: "Who's in charge of this place? Can't you Presbyterians make a decent Holocaust memorial? Would it be so hard for someone to get some new candles? It would have been worth the money to invest in some decent pews..."

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"In my own Christian tradition we believe that God's nature and love are beyond absolutes. At the very least, this means that they are not below absolutes. Therefore there are times when faced with assaults on human dignity that we are right—dare I say called—to speak in absolutes. Absolute violations of human dignity require absolute condemnation."

Jayber Crow

Wendell Berry

Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000

When I suggested to the editor that I review a book by Wendell Berry, he replied, "Berry would be an excellent choice. But don't ask for my recommendation. My problem with him is...my favorite book is whichever one I happen to have in my hand." Mine too—the poetry, the essays, the short stories, are all essential reading. In the end I chose Berry's 2000 novel, *Jayber Crow*, for its spiritual and ethical themes, and its richness of both language and insight.

Jayber's narrative, loquaciously titled "The Life Story of Jayber Crow, Barber, of the Port William Membership, as Written by Himself," covers over 60 years, from his birth in 1914, through the deaths of both his parents and his foster family during the first decade of his life, his years in an orphanage and a ministerial college, and his eventual return to Port William at age 24, to spend the rest of his days there.

The early chapters are filled with humor and incident, including a great flood and the encounter with a young girl who will become Beatrice to his Dante. But Jayber's musings on the deepest issues of personal and communal life are the soul of the book.

Jayber's ethical search leads him to doubt the teachings of his seminary: "Everything bad was laid upon the body, and everything good was credited to the soul. It scared me a little when I realized that I saw it the other way around. If the soul and the body really were divided, then it seemed to me that all the worst sins—hatred and anger and self-righteousness and even greed and lust—came from the soul. But these preachers I'm talking about all thought that the soul could do no wrong, but always had its face washed and its pants on and was in agony over having to associate with the flesh and the world. And yet these same people believed in the resurrection of the body."

His shift from seminarian to barber only deepens his spirituality. In one great affirmation, he says, "I am as mystified as anybody by the transformation known as death, and the Resurrection is more real to me than most things I have not yet seen."

This individual faith is overshadowed by Jayber's belief in a "membership" that closely approximates the concept of the Mystical Body: "What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection...a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of will toward goodwill.... My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time, for the community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless its members and maybe nonetheless essential to it. I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace. And so there we all were on a little wave of time lifting up to eternity, and none of us ever in time would know what to make of it. How could we? It is a mystery, for we are eternal beings living in time."

The book is Berry's longest, at over 350 pages, and that, together with his style (often described by terms like deliberate, limpid, and elegiac), may make it a challenge for a school assignment. On the other hand, its humor, and most of all the chaste—there is no other word for it—love story at its heart, may work for readers both young and old, especially those already disposed toward the big questions. As a mentor tells the young Jayber:

"You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers. You will have to live them out—perhaps a little at a time."

"And how long is that going to take?"

"I don't know. As long as you live, perhaps."

"That could be a long time."

"I will tell you a further mystery," he said. "It may take longer." ●

Dick Barbieri, having completed his eighth interim headship, is now writing, advising schools, and volunteering for organizations from Facing History and Ourselves to Habitat for Humanity. He can be reached at richarde.barbieri@gmail.com



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See additional details, including holy days for the month of January, at www.csee.org



February 1

Saint Brigid of Kildare

Celtic / Christianity

Saint Brigid of Kildare, who lived from 451 to 525 C.E., is one of Ireland's patron saints. She was an Irish Christian nun and the founder of several convents including Kildare Abbey, one of the most prestigious abbeys in Ireland.

February 2

Candlemas

Christianity

Under Mosaic law, after giving birth Mary was obligated to go to the temple with an offering and have the priest pray for her so that she would be ritually cleansed. This event thus marked the first solemn "presentation of Jesus" in the temple. Since the 4th century, when Jesus' birth was set at December 25, this presentation day has been set on February 2. In Catholic tradition, beeswax candles were blessed and then distributed to the clergy and the laity, after which there was a procession. Such processions with candles still take place even today, with the priest leading the procedure, stopping occasionally to chant "the light of Christ."

February 2

Imbolc

Neo-Paganism

Falling halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, Imbolc celebrates the increased growing power of the sun, and the anticipation of spring. This celebration is commonly thought to be a precursor to Groundhog Day.

February 3

Setsubun sai

Shinto

This festival marks the end of "Kan," the coldest season. It is known to many as a good luck festival, where beans are thrown to keep demons away.

February 3

Chinese New Year

Confucianism/Daoism/Buddhism

The most important holiday for the Chinese, the New Year is a time to reflect on the past and celebrate the future. This is a 15-day celebration with each day having special significance. For example, the first day is recognized as the time to welcome the gods of heaven and earth, and many people abstain from eating meat. Sons-in-law pay respect to their spouses' parents on the third and fourth days. On the fifth day, people remain in the home to welcome the god of wealth, while during the sixth through the tenth days, relatives and friends are visited. The fifteenth and final day ends with the Lantern Festival, held at night. Traditionally, trays of oranges, tangerines, and candy, as well as vases of flowers, are displayed. The color red, used extensively in decoration and dress, symbolizes good luck and wards off evil spirits.

February 6

Four Chaplains Sunday

Interfaith

In February of 1943 C.E., the U.S.A.T. ship *Dorchester* was transporting troops to European battlefields with over 900 soldiers aboard when it was hit by a torpedo off the coast of Greenland. The ship sank in 20 minutes, and only 230 soldiers survived in the icy ocean waters. Survivors recounted how the ship's four chaplains—a Catholic priest, a Methodist minister, a Protestant minister, and a Jewish rabbi—helped the men into the lifeboats. When life jackets ran out, the four, who had been friends since chaplaincy school, took off their own jackets and gave them to individuals who still needed them. The four were last seen with their arms linked and praying aloud as the *Dorchester* sank, killing them and over 600 other soldiers.

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Holidays Continued from Page 7

February 6

Triodion begins

Orthodox Christianity

Triodion is the three-week preparation period before Lent begins. Followers gradually modify their diets and meditate on themes like humility, repentance, and forgiveness, to prepare for the great fast, prayer, and worship that happens over Lent.

February 8

Vasant Panchami

Hinduism

This festival is dedicated to Saraswati, the goddess of learning. On this day, schools and colleges often organize special worship of Saraswati, many participate in special activities at Hindu temples, and young children are taught their first words.

February 11

Our Lady of Lourdes

Roman Catholic Christianity

This marks the day in 1858 C.E. when St. Bernadette had her first vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the city of Lourdes in southern France. She had 18 apparitions in all, one which told her to dig for a spring. The water of this spring is said to have great healing powers, and Christians make pilgrimages to visit this spring and the church there.

February 14

St. Valentine's Day

Roman Catholic Christianity

Pope Gelasius assigned February 14th as Saint Valentine's Day in 496 C.E. This day commemorates the death of Saint Valentine of Rome, who, according to tradition, was martyred on February 14 ca. 270 C.E. However, less commonly known, this day also recognizes another Saint Valentine: Saint Valentine of Terni, who was martyred in 197 C.E. Saint Valentine's Day was not associated with romantic love until the High Middle Ages, when legends and stories about Valentine were popularized by writers like Geoffrey Chaucer.

February 15

Nirvana Day

Buddhism

This day commemorates the Buddha's death, when he reached Nirvana at the age of 80. Nirvana is the end to

all desire, and thus the end to all suffering that craving brings about in us. Buddhists who observe Nirvana day often do so by examining their lives, in order to make those changes needed to help them achieve the perfect peace of Nirvana. Observances sometimes take place in monasteries, where people read the *Paranibbana Sutta*, a Buddhist text that describes the Buddha's final days.

February 15

Mawlid an Nabi

Islam

Mawlid al-Nabi means "the birth of the Prophet." This day celebrates the birthday of the Prophet Muhammed, founder of Islam. In some sects, the day is spent reciting litanies and special sermons, honoring religious dignitaries, gift giving, and feasting.

February 24

Saint Matthew's Day

Christianity

This Christian Feast day recognizes Saint Matthew, one of the twelve apostles and author of the first Gospel. Reputedly a tax collector in the early part of his life, Saint Matthew is often considered the patron saint of bankers.

February 26-March 1

Intercalary Days

Baha'i

The Intercalary Days, or "Days of Ha," occur between the eighteenth and nineteenth months of the Baha'i calendar, and end one day before the Baha'i fast begins. There are four Intercalary Days in ordinary years and five in leap years. These are days of preparation for the fast: days of hospitality, charity, gift-giving, ministering to the poor and sick, and so on.

February 27

Meatfare Sunday

Orthodox Christianity

Traditionally, this is the last day that Orthodox Christians eat meat before commencing their fast, which lasts until Easter. ●



I was so distracted by my discomfort in the place that I gave up on a spiritual renewal and just walked to the back of the chapel to gather my students and leave. I found them lying on the floor, comfortable, giggling, smiling, talking, and even resting, as if they were in a field. I scolded them for being so casual in this solemn place. They sat up and felt the instant shame I showered on them. I gave them a warning then turned to walk out.

On my way to the door, I saw an information sheet available in a dozen languages; I realized I had come in the exit, not the entrance, so I had missed this orienting document. I picked one up, just to know whom I should blame for this unkempt building. But then I read the sheet.

It welcomed visitors and made the following declaration. "Welcome, Friend. You will see that this room has no right angles, no uniform colors, no straight edges. Part of the evil of the Nazi regime was its obsession with making things straight, correct, uniform and appropriate to itself. It is this dark human desire to criticize, to correct, to shame, and to coerce into conformity that drove the Nazis in their evil projects. This chapel with its imperfect but sacred space stands against this kind of evil..."

For the second time, a lump gathered in my throat and the sobs started. I had wandered that concentration camp wondering with no answers how a world created and indwelt with the love of God could ever produce a Nazi. And yet it only took me a few moments to start that journey myself.

Of course the students felt comfortable there. They never read that information sheet. Instead, they had a natural reaction to the space: they felt comfortable—at home—in a space that celebrated difference and imperfection and authentic humanity. They were being kinder, more patient, more moral, and more humane than they had been since our trip began. While my inner bully was trying to fix the place, their more humble and more human hearts were being fixed by it.

What are the cultural forces in our schools and in our society that fight against humble, honest and self-reflective ways of dealing with differences? Why are we often trying to "fix" each other into people or ideas that make us less uncomfortable? That is, why is it so hard to get our students and ourselves to construct moral reactions or argu-

ments that consider the log in our own eye before they measure the twig in our neighbors'? This mud-slinging political season has been a reminder of the age-old argument: is the moral formation of a student or a society best served by adhering to and proclaiming absolutes or by (the straw-man foil to this absolute framework) "situation ethics" or "values clarification"?

Am I suggesting that all moral absolutes are potentially blinding or bullying and need be subjected to or even abandoned by our own personal feelings? Am I suggesting that we challenge bullying with statements of mere personal discomfort? In the face of absolute outrages like the Holocaust, say the absolutists, is "this feels uncomfortable to me" the strongest we can protest? Surely not.

In my own Christian tradition we believe that God's nature and love are beyond absolutes. At the very least, this means that they are not below absolutes. Therefore there are times when faced with assaults on human dignity that we are right—dare I say called—to speak in absolutes. Absolute violations of human dignity require absolute condemnation.

The challenge for us all is to discern the difference between violations of moral norms and violations of cultural assumptions. This is hard and imperfect work. But what is at stake in discerning this difference is nothing less than fighting bullying effectively or becoming a bully eventually. At some point we have to admit that for the slave owners, the anti-suffragists, or the pro-segregationists, much of what they thought "pleased God" turned out instead to be merely a complex collection of cultural wishes pleasing to the Western tradition. C. S. Lewis once said that the Bible was a book written by and for adults, and if we cannot speak about it as adults—employing all our God-given abilities of reasoning and critical thinking—then we should not talk about the Bible at all. ●

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Upcoming Events

December 2010

S	M	T	W	Th	F	Sa
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

January 2011

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February 2011

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March 2011

S	M	T	W	Th	F	Sa
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27	28	29	30	31		

Webinar: Creating and Maintaining a School Spiritual Climate

Jan. 5, 2011 (3:30 Central)

This webinar will discuss the essential components of creating a school climate to foster spiritual development and make suggestions regarding how to implement them.

Webinar: Best Practices in Ethical Education

Jan. 26, 2011 (3:30 Eastern)

This webinar will offer schools a template for looking at their character/ethical education programs, and offer best practices with examples from a number of schools.

Religious Pluralism in Our Schools: Making the Experience Rich

Our annual event co-sponsored with NAES with Rabbi Judd Levingston and Rev. Timothy Morehouse

February 2-4, 2011

Garrison Institute
Garrison, New York

Webinar: Developing Students as Ethical Leaders

Feb. 9, 2011 (3:30 Central)

This 45-minute webinar will present the key techniques and leadership development structure offered by schools in the past years of CSEE's Symposia on Developing Student Leaders.

Honor Codes & Councils: From Nuts and Bolts to a Finely-Tuned System

With John Roberts, Ph.D., co-author of *A Handbook for Developing and Sustaining Honor Systems*

February 18-20, 2011

Harker School
San Jose, California

Fourth Annual Symposium on Developing Student Leadership

With three schools highlighted, three exemplary programs, and more!

April 1-2, 2011

Harpeth Hall School
Nashville, Tennessee

Building Character, Diminishing Bullying

With Thomas Lickona, Ph.D., and Maurice Elias, Ph.D.

April 15-16, 2011

Dwight-Englewood School
Englewood, New Jersey

Summer Institute on Teaching the World's Religions

This year's focus will be on Islam (Teaching the Qur'an) and Buddhism, plus more!

June 20-25, 2011

Athenian School
San Francisco, California

Adult Ethics Institute

CSEE's last ethics institute. If you always wanted to go but never did, this is your chance!

With Rev. Dan Heischman

July 17-22, 2011

Mt. Hood, Oregon ●



Some Tragedies Can Be Prevented

by David Streight

T Tyler Clementi's tragic death brought to our attention, one more time, the tip of an iceberg we float around every day. I use the word iceberg because, though we see the tip—gay and lesbian students and teachers attend and work in all our schools, as do a lesser number of those who are bisexual or transgender—there are many more of these children of God than we know.

We can hope that “problems” related to sexual identity stay beneath the surface, but the only purpose served by such hope is maintenance of our comfort levels. And comfort—in schools that constantly push students to push themselves, to get out of their comfort zones—is not what good education, or good sports, or good anything is all about.

How a school decides to act on the behalf of these young people is a moral issue in itself. Because of the society we live in, they are one of the most fragile groups included under the diversity umbrella. Half of those who “come out” at school and are harassed because of their sexual identity entertain serious thoughts of suicide. The statistic should frighten us. And shortly thereafter, it should spur us to action. We owe these young people more than we traditionally give them in terms of support; an occasional assembly or a stand-alone group like a gay-straight alliance at school does not suffice.

We can change school culture. The path to change is known and the success statistics—especially in schools—are clear. We can create school “societies” where consideration and respect are the norm, where cruelty and taunting are the unapproved exception. There are eight or nine key components in the process, all of them doable, and doable in all schools. Schools like Pine Point (Connecticut), Kent Denver (Colorado), and the Walker School (Georgia) are proof that the steps can be covered and, though covering the steps is never a guarantee, the climates of respect and consideration at those three schools testify to the gains attainable when we follow best practices for school climate.

The path to a best-practices school climate can be trodden without greatly taxing either the school's finances or its time commitments. The steps begin with visible and vocal support from the head, and run through setting tangible goals, ensuring that teachers and coaches and advisors and others are in accord with those goals and help integrate them into their contacts with students, and into making sure someone is a resource provider/program overseer regarding whether the school's goals are being worked for. These schools also make sure that students feel the school's respect for them, that they have meaningful roles to play in the school, and that they feel empowered to take action on issues, great and small, when action is called for.

What happens in schools like these is that students feel like they belong, students feel like they are respected by both adults and peers, and students feel like they have some ownership for the kind of school society they are living in. Students in schools like these have little interest in making life difficult for others. They have little interest in taunts and harassment. Students in schools like these—all of whom feel different in one way or another—end up being more accepting of differences in others. Students in schools like these are stronger academically, because they have more attention to devote to academics.

The best way to work at school to alleviate tragedies related to sexual identity happens to be the best way to alleviate a lot of other moral/ethical tragedies, too. ●