

Hope in the Unseen

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First Reading:

Langston Hughes' "Harlem: A Dream Deferred"

Born in Joplin, Mo., to a mother who was a teacher and a father who was a storekeeper, Langston Hughes early on was determined to be a poet. He went to Columbia University under the false promise to his father that he'd pursue engineering, dropped out and got immersed in the blues and jazz scene in Harlem and traveled the world for a while. Blues and jazz rhythms influenced his writings, which focused on the ordinary experience of black Americans.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun
Or fester like a sore --
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over --
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Second Reading:

from "A Hope in the Unseen" by Ron Suskind (pp.30-32):

A boy, if he is lucky, discovers his limitations across a leisurely passage of years, with self-awareness arriving slowly. That way, at least he has plenty of time to heroically imagine himself first. Most boys unfold in this natural, measured way, growing up with at least one adult on the scene who can convincingly fake being all-powerful, omniscient, and unfailingly protective for a kid's first decade or so, providing an invaluable canopy of reachable stars and monsters that are comfortably make-believe.

By this reckoning, Cedric Lavar Jennings wasn't so lucky. ... From the start, Cedric received a steady diet of uncertainty and upheaval. He and Barbara moved around a lot

... as they bounced from short-term rentals to pullout couches or bedrolls at one of Barbara's sisters' apartments. ... [Barbara had quit her job and gone on welfare to be with her son during his crucial early years.] They lived frugally. ... She'd buy him books [at thrift shops and] ... secondhand toys. She bought cards with colors and numbers and they'd sit while she flashed the cards. They visited museums and the Anacostia library ... This sheltered, early period, though, was bound to be short lived. Just after Cedric's fifth birthday, Barbara knew she'd have to start building his defenses. He would start a full day of kindergarten in the fall and she would go back to work. But before that, there were things Barbara wanted him to know. ...

"See that man over there?" she said firmly. "He's a drug dealer. He sometimes asks kids to do things. Don't ever talk to him. ..." Block by block, corner by corner they went, until she'd pointed out every drug dealer for five blocks in either direction. Later that night, she slowly explained the daily drill. After school he would walk by himself to the apartment, double lock the door, and immediately call her -- the number would be taped by the phone. And along the way, he would talk to no one.

Sermon:

The book "A Hope in the Unseen" was chosen as Summit's book for the whole town to read and discuss this year. The book is journalist Ron Suskind's profile of the young man, Cedric Jennings, whom he follows through high school and toward his dream of attending an Ivy League college. The capper to the Summit program is that the protagonist of the story, Cedric himself, will come on Nov. 2 to Summit High School to speak. Our own Marilyn Pfaltz and Jean Crichton were part of the small group asked to write a study guide to the book.

When the book begins, Cedric Jennings is attending Ballou High School, "the most troubled and violent school in the blighted southeast corner of Washington, D.C." He dreams of attending an Ivy League college, although he hardly knows what that looks like -- this is the "hope in the unseen." His mother, a single mom working a low-level government job, shares the dream with Cedric and tries, amid all the violence and chaos and forces working against his success and even survival, to guide the boy with a firm hand through these important years, as we saw her do in the snapshot of his early years in the reading.

Cedric's life is focused on school, home and his strong Pentecostal church with its matriarchal women who dote on him and a male pastor who may be his most dependable male role model. In a culture that does not favor academic success, particularly not for boys, Cedric endured the jeering and sometimes violent flirtations by his male peers, but up against that the support and protection from male teachers who make sanctuaries for him in their classrooms.

There are lots of ways one might read the book. You can read it as the story of just another family trying to get along against the obstacles it faces and with certain grace-filled strengths. You can read it as the story of a boy with a dream. You can read it as a

story that points out the power of a strong parent figure, of the challenges of single-parent families, or people trying to live on minimum wage, as emblematic of the challenges of our urban school systems. It is, of course, all those things.

The power of Cedric Jennings' determination to propel himself through and over obstacles is remarkable. The power of his mother's vision and love for her child, her desire to protect him and fuel his dreams for himself, is uplifting. The inherent challenges of his mother as a single parent living on minimum wage to keep a roof over her and her son's head, food in their bellies, the heat on and the basic necessities available is palpable and at times painful. It's all there in the book, which is brought alive with dialogue and narration that Ron Suskind apparently drew very closely from verbatim interviews of the people he portrays.

However, what struck me most both the first time I read it, which I did more than seven years ago while serving a D.C. church, and again this time is how stacked the deck is against this bright, determined boy and his family. Because he ultimately realizes his dream of attending an Ivy League college, I worry that this book and others like it will get read as proof that America is still a land of opportunity where the avenues are wide open to all who have the will and determination to pursue them. Instead, all Cedric's intelligence and determination and family support aside, it seems to me a story of a miracle -- the luck of a boy who gets followed by a Wall Street Journal reporter and probably takes additional sustenance from that attention and gets vital breaks because the world is now watching.

A week ago, I was in Boston sitting in on the interviews of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee -- our association's appointed body that credentials ministers. One of the candidates who came through the committee, a man who had also studied education at the graduate level, spoke about the notion of education in our nation being a ladder to upward mobility and went on to say that for many poor folks and disadvantaged minorities, what is available is a "rungless ladder." That image stuck with me.

It turns out the metaphor itself dates back to a book by the Unitarian Harriet Beecher Stowe. She uses it in her pointedly written fictional work "The Minister's Wooing," which is meant as a critique of Calvinism. In that book, the image describes the way to heaven (Jacob's ladder), but a ladder in Calvinism that had been stripped of the rungs of hard work and effort as a means to salvation and replaced by the notion of mysterious, seemingly even capricious divine grace. It was a ladder no one could traverse on his or her own -- a rungless ladder.

For many folks, education can be this rungless ladder. Some of the reasons for this are structural, some cultural biases, all of it essentially leaving whole communities without the way out that you and I took for granted or lucked our way into.

As far as I can tell, the rungs of this ladder get removed almost immediately. If we look at how our school systems are run in this country, or at least in this state, who after all is it who has access to the best in primary and middle school education? In our current

system, where school budgets are related to property taxes, the best-funded schools are those located in areas where the property values are highest. When parents don't like the public schools, those who get the best education are those who can afford to pay for it to be provided privately. So far, that means that the access to quality education at the elementary, middle and high school levels is, by and large, for those already privileged. Even the minority recruitment and enrichment programs like the one Cedric attends in the summer between his junior and senior year are those, as he also finds, predominantly filled with already privileged people from within traditionally marginalized groups. Of the 52 at MIT's MITES program for kids gifted in science and math, Cedric is one of only two from working-class families. The rest have parents who are doctors and lawyers and people in white-collar professions.

So from the onset, economic inequalities strip the ladder of some of its rungs. What does this inequality look like in a concrete, crayons-and-paper kind of way? To help paint that picture, I called a member of the Cherry Hill Unitarian Universalist congregation, where I served briefly as an interim minister before I came to Summit. The woman -- we'll call her Jane -- teaches in an elementary school in Camden, one of the poorest cities in New Jersey. I went one day to read to her class and I remembered the stories she told of her kids' lives and of the dearth of resources the school had to offer them. I called her and asked her to give me an update. Listen to what her kindergarten kids face and what we do and do not offer them in this state that is ours.

The makeup of Jane's class is always in flux. Every year she has kids who come and go, spending a few weeks or months with her before moving on, because their families are homeless and housed temporarily nearby. A large percentage of the kids have only one parent active in their lives. Once she visited a home to see why a child was getting so little help with her homework and was met by the blind grandmother who was raising the girl. So these children come from generationally broken, savagely disadvantaged homes. Moreover, unlike Langston Hughes' own story, these kids are not born with the blessing of parents who have a generational legacy of education to offer to their children. Jane finds few parents have imparted academic drive or even curiosity to their children. Many of the children have few or no books at home, so Jane has made it a practice to give her kids books as rewards and at the holidays. Yet when Jane went to visit one family to whom she had given books, she found they had written all over them. "When I asked them why they had written in the books," she said, "they said it was because they didn't have any paper to color on."

Between 90 and 95 percent of the kids in Jane's class qualify for the free breakfast and lunch program. So these are not folks who can bring in boxes of extra supplies for the whole class or outfit the classroom with toys from a generous trip to Toys 'R' Us. Yet it is the second year in Jane's nine years of teaching that there have been no books or supplies waiting for her when the year started and no explanation for why not. Over the years, on a teacher's salary, she has spent thousands of unreimbursed dollars to outfit her class. Jane has no discretionary budget for her class. Meanwhile, her cousin who teaches at Radnor High School, one of the best in the country and located in a wealthy school district, has a \$10,000 annual discretionary budget to outfit her classroom and augment

her resources. The one year that there was a windfall and Jane and the other teachers each got a \$2,000 discretionary budget, they busily spent it, hoping to store up for leaner years. However, about three years later, the building they taught in was condemned on VERY short notice. They had five minutes to get out of the building, and only after much negotiation were given a few hours to clear out what they could from their rooms. The rest was put in storage. A good quarter of what was stored has apparently been lost.

These teachers and their kids have now spent five years since that evacuation in “temporary” classrooms in a pre-World War I building. Jane’s room is 20 by 16 feet, with no air conditioner, sink or toilet. The heat is either very hot or cold. There is no playground for the children save a fence-enclosed blacktop that she and the other teachers had to make into a place for fruitful recess by buying balls and jump ropes out of their own pockets. There is no sign of a new school building being built. “Do you think our suburban parents would stand for this?” she asked. But these parents don’t know how to fight for their kids and have long ago learned what it felt like to be disempowered.

I went to Albany this weekend to respond to a paper on growth that the minister of our largest Unitarian Universalist church presented there at the annual gathering of the New York Convention of Universalists. One of his themes was excellence and intentionality -- how growth happens when we insist on and demand excellence and are intentional about all that we do. It took me back to my time in Washington, D.C., at the Universalist church I served there when there was a moment that lacked excellence and intentionality.

The church was host to a splinter Baptist group, and early on in that relationship, I walked around the building with one of the matriarchs of that group to figure out how we’d negotiate this sharing of space. We came at one point to the nursery where our babies and toddlers went on Sunday mornings. “This place is filled with broken toys and castoffs and games with missing pieces,” she said. “We would never allow this because we’d worry about what this says to our children about how we feel about our faith and our church and about them.”

I was never so embarrassed and so caught short by something that rang so true but had never occurred to me. Similarly, I was never as thrilled as when I came here and the building was done and the RE committee and people like Colette Parsons created a nursery with carefully chosen toys and beautiful surroundings for our kids. Our nursery said to our children we loved them and we wanted them to love being here, because this place mattered to us.

I wonder if we couldn’t apply the same questions that that Baptist woman asked me to what Jane’s kids in Camden face and what Cedric Jennings and his classmates no doubt also faced as they grew up in southeast D.C. What do the places that we send them to from age 5 to 18 (and legally require them to be in) say about how we feel about these boys and girls and about the importance for us of their education? It seems to me that, if it weren’t for a few extraordinary teachers and administrators who carve out pockets of dignity and hope, the message would largely be about the disposability of some American lives.

What does all this have to say to us, suburbanites who chose this and nearby communities because we value strong community and, in many cases, because we also value the strong educational system in these communities? What does it say to us as members of these communities but also as UUs? We UUs, after all, are the ones (at last report) with the highest SAT scores of any religious group, the highest average education of any religious group. We are the group that treasures lifelong learning and studied not because we had to but because it made us come alive. We are also the tradition whose family tree includes folks like Elizabeth Peabody, the champion of kindergarten, and her brother-in-law Horace Mann, the champion of public education. This love of education runs in our blood past, present and future.

Well, it seems to me that this is a natural place where our passion, our love, fits perfectly with the world's brokenness and need. This is not only something we are perfectly suited to care about, something we know a lot about, but the good news is there is a lot we can do and do easily. Let me give you two examples of UU churches that partnered with schools and what they accomplished.

When I was at All Souls in New York, we partnered with a local elementary school that, although on the Upper East Side, had a largely immigrant population. We sent tutors there. We served as a resource for the new, energetic principal. We could offer training for her teachers because we had gifted educators in the congregation. We did what her immigrant parents had not yet learned to do, we advocated for her and this school and her children. We helped secure grant money for a renovation that was needed in the library. Moreover, in 1990, when the computer lab desperately needed updating, we wrote to Apple Computer and asked for donations. When Apple wrote back and said it never gave to schools except those that connected to graduate students in education -- schools, of course, that were already significantly privileged -- we wrote back and said we were a church with 1,500 well-placed, motivated members who would love to see Apple donate computers to our adopted school and would not forget its generosity, and as a carrot we said that our members with IT training would see that the lab got set up and secured appropriately and the staff of the school trained to make use of the resources. We got a computer lab full of new donated Apple computers!

Jane's UU congregation in Cherry Hill has partnered with her. Each year, not only her kindergarten class but all the first-graders and kindergarteners get a book for Christmas from members of the Unitarian church. Moreover, members who know that Jane gives out books all year long as rewards and recognition for good work independently give her armfuls of gently used and new books to hand out as gifts. Church members come to read to the children. Others bring in discarded supplies from corporate work rooms or buy a year's supply of markers in their annual back-to-school shopping trips. Moreover, until last year Camden had 22 elementary schools and one library. It was advocacy that helped get a second one built. When it was made known that the newly finished library had almost no books on its shelves, it was church and other volunteers whose donations put books on the empty shelves so that the children and Camden had another resource.

We cannot fix troubled families or undo generations of disadvantages in a few gestures. We can be clear that the myth of self-made man or woman is a cruel lie if the ladder has no rungs. We can help reattach some rungs so dreams don't dry up in the sun or sag like a heavy load, but have a chance of reaching some kind of fruition. We can step in to advocate and support local schools so that all our children go to places for at least a few hours every day that say they are valued and so is their future and that provide an honest mode of transport upward toward what it is we dream for them and they dream for themselves.

For those who would like to help me find a school we can partner with and be part of the effort to connect their needs to our gifts and talents and strengths, please see me. For today I will have a basket on the welcome table for donations to seed our efforts so that there are resources to begin that work as soon as the relationship is secured. I will send Jane a few books for her classroom, meanwhile, on our behalf. If you want to help with that effort, see me too.

I'd like to close with another poem by Langston Hughes, one that speaks of the kind of dream we all share:

"I Dream a World"

*I dream a world where man
No other man will scorn,
Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn.
I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom's way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day.
A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free,
Where wretchedness will hang its head
And joy, like a pearl,
Attends the needs of all mankind --
Of such I dream, my world!*

May it be so for our world, the world we dream.