

Inclusion: Parking Meters and the Walk to Community

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April 9, 2017

Paul: This year we've been reflecting on a wide range of relationships in our lives. The implications of healthy and unhealthy relationships, the skills we need to build lasting relationships, and the simple reality that so many types of relationships deeply matter: our relationships with people near and far, our relationship with the earth, with history, and with money.

Michael: Today I'd like to talk about inclusive, as opposed to exclusive relationships...about the choices we make ourselves and as a community about who participates, who matters, who is the "we" when we say who we are. One of many ways we can ask this question involves children with disabilities and their schools. In my experience, the care we take and the choices we make in this area have broader implications about how we understand community.

Paul: We come together today as people of principle and high aspiration, knowing that we need one another. We come together today with the past behind us, upholding us, and maybe haunting us ... and with the future before us, uncertain, and filled with the magic of possibility. We acknowledge this past and this future, and we set them aside for now to be here, just here, embraced by the spirit of love.

Michael: Let's say together our covenant:

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

CHILDREN'S FOCUS *A Special Trade*, by Sally Wittman

Summary: An old neighbor delights in pushing the little girl's stroller and helping her to become independent. Time passes and we find her pushing his wheelchair with an equal devotion.

MESSAGE

--In 1980, I was walking with a class of first graders through a Syracuse neighborhood. I was Assistant Principal of a primary school and helping the classroom teacher accompany the children on one of their twice weekly neighborhood explores. We crossed the tree-lined street and started walking down the next block—one with parking meters. One of the students—Jamika—left the sidewalk line as we passed the first meter and turned the handle on the meter and then returned to the walking line. I don't remember if I saw that first turn or not, but I certainly noticed by the second or third time that she did it. I didn't know what to do about it and no one else—staff or students—seemed to question Jamika's turn of every single parking meter knob on that block.

--I got into special education somewhat by accident. I'd worked in open, alternative schools in Santa Barbara and then worked with what were termed "seriously emotionally disturbed" children in Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia. The DC and Philadelphia kids, however, were really ones who acted-out and aggressively mostly because of their traumatic home and neighborhood. Whatever images you have when you think of harsh and traumatic home environments, that's what these kids experienced. I next ended up at Syracuse University without realizing that I had joined nation's most significant hotbed of radical university thought on inclusion for children with special needs. It was a wonderful three years there with radical school reformers.

--However, the best part of my Syracuse adventure was meeting Ann...actually at one point serving as a very inadequate university supervisor of her interning student teacher.

--So...65 now. Worked in schools for 40 years as a teacher and administrator—retired from the Ferndale Schools three years ago where I had responsibility for most of the non-general education programs (special education, homeless services, native American education, domestic violence, and student health services, early childhood education).

--A tiny bit of history and even some theory:

--There is an amazing story about inclusion of children with special needs in schools, but it's really a story about our society. Struggle for inclusion parallels every other major civil rights struggle—and even runs in the same general timeframe that most of our other recent civil rights stories run. This struggle particularly flows from the *Brown v. Bd* 1954. Supreme Court decision that outlawed school segregation justified by the false claim of "separate but equal."

--Imagine that you are a parent of a five or six year-old in any city or town in this country in 1967. Imagine that you try to enroll your child in kindergarten because it's that time of the year. You go to your neighborhood school. Then imagine being told that your child can't come to your neighborhood school...or even any public school in your town. Why? Because your child has autism (which was barely understood at that time) or a physical disability such as spina bifida or a cognitive impairment such as down's syndrome. You try and make sense of this...and you can't. And there isn't anything that you can do about it. Options basically include keeping your son or daughter at home or with relatives or thinking about some sort of inadequate institutional setting. Imagine that you then move to another town or city and when your child is now 11—its 1972. It doesn't matter because your child is still not permitted to attend a public school unless the school has some sort of voluntary informal or unique practice allowing such attendance.

--So, your child can't go to school...while you are also watching all of the other civil rights struggles in our country emerge. Think of the obvious parallels to other social movements.

--The first change agents in inclusion for youth with unique disability needs were Scandinavians who preached something called "normalization" which basically meant that people with developmental disabilities ought to be accorded the same type of life experiences afforded to

people without disabilities. Some of these early reformers—including the wonderfully named Wolf Wolfensberger—ended up at Syracuse in the 1960's and gave 'normalization' an American flavor. These reformers including again those in Syracuse began an intensive and exhaustive campaign attacking the institutionalization of children and adults in what they came to call 'human warehouses.'

--I'm not going to tell you about all of the specific court cases and legislative victories except to summarize it this way. Throughout the 60s and 70's, growing numbers of parents joined professional advocates in pushing change. They formed support groups, studied pertinent law, lobbied legislators, raised money, filed lawsuits, formed organizations with increasing political clout, and sometimes, broke established law. They were generally pains in the behind.

--As a result of all of the above—and much more—Congress in 1974 passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act known as PL 94-142 rewritten in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—which while it has been tinkered with since, still forms the basic federal mandate for providing services to students with disabilities. It's certainly unclear how all this will fair under DeVos and 45, but it's worth noting that it would be a very unwise presidential strategy to royally tick off parents and guardians of students with special learning needs. From much personal experience, people fight the hardest when it's about their own children.

--Once the federal mandate passed and each state came forth with its own versions of that mandate, the inclusion debate focused on two questions. The first was how much and what type of service would be provided students with unique learning issues. The second question—the one that I'm talking about here—is where would services be offered: In separate, segregated classrooms or in regular, general education classrooms, or in some combination of the two.

-- For years, the overriding belief is that children with special needs needed to be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment—or LRE-- the one that provided as much 'normalization' as possible to use the old term. The terms describing LRE—the ones that may have heard of and that have evolved over the years are: "Mainstreaming" "Integration" "Inclusion"

--Before sharing concrete examples, let me share what I mean by traditional models for serving students with special needs and inclusionary models.

--Traditional models pull children out of regular classes for part, most, or all of the day. Specially trained teachers and specialists such as speech therapists and occupational therapists provide services based on each child's Individual Education Plan outside the regular classroom and then work to train the child to be able to transfer that skill or skills to a more generalized setting. A key problem here has always been how does a child...and then a teenager... transfer those school learning skills to their future real worlds.

--Inclusion assume sthat each child is unique in how he or she learns. whereby all instruction and classroom experience is differentiated for all students. Students with all sorts of unique learning patterns—different languages, highly capable, artistic, students with disabilities, students from

homeless or challenging backgrounds...that is, everyone, is taught in their regular education classroom. Specialists do their work largely in the general education classroom and team with the classroom teacher. Each child has an identity solely with their home classroom. There are no issues of transferring skills to a student's "real world". All students have greater opportunity to learn how to be good friends and supporters of a diverse student body. There is no such creature as a "special education student" or a "regular education" students—there are just students.

INTERLUDE

--Enough theory—Let me share what happened at two schools and what it meant for students and families. I was originally going to talk about three schools and include Ann's kindergarten classroom here in Bellingham where I volunteered in for three years after my retirement, but I decided to delete that section because it would have: 1) embarrassed Ann; and 2) this is a small community and I would have had to talk about children that might be known in the community.

--I worked at Jowonio School about 35 years ago. Jowonio was—and has always been--my litmus test. Jowonio means "to set free" in the Onondaga native language—one of the seven tribes in the Iroquois Confederation that borders Syracuse. My friend Peter Knoblock opened the school in 1969. It started as a cooperative venture between parents and teachers to provide an alternative education for elementary children. In its early years, kids came to Jowonio because their public schools could no longer tolerate them or because they could no longer tolerate their public schools. As Jowonio evolved, its teaching staff discovered other children who had been excluded from public schools. Part of this discovery was precipitated by parents of their current students whose sibs had also been barred from public school—these parents wanted Jowonio to open its doors to these youth. Jowonio began enrolling students labeled seriously emotionally disturbed, severely speech impaired, and autistic. What's important here is that Jowonio believed that opening its door was the right thing to do. Jowonio may not have had the educational knowledge base to work with these students, but the school's staff and parents wanted to make it work. The staff flipped a long-standing educational axiom: they decided to develop programs that fit the needs of unique learners, rather than children having to fit the needs of the program. This may sound simplistic and naïve and clichéd, but it was a very big deal in how service to students with significant disabilities were served. Almost 50 years later, all types of children—even those with the severest kinds of autism and developmental and communication and behavioral delays--are in community all day long every day. This has been replicated all over the country.

--Back to Jamika and the parking meters. She keeps turning the parking meter knobs. What I learned later was that Jamika had to that point been unwilling and resistant—which meant tantruming-- to any effort to get her to leave her classroom—actually, it meant any effort to get her to get up off the classroom rug while she perseverated with circular rotating objects like car wheels, propellers, and toy clocks. The staff had helped Jamika to gradually lessen her rigidity and eventually to begin moving throughout the classroom, eventually to the playground, and finally to the neighborhood walks. Much of the support for Jamika's growing engagement was nurtured by other children in the class...who understood that they each had a role in looking out for and helping one another. So...when she turned the parking meter knobs, everyone but me

understood that it was just fine. Her parents were thrilled to learn that Jamika had found another circular rotating object to focus on, but one that didn't restrict her life as much as it had been previously restricted.

--Moving forward briefly to Lawton, a Seattle elementary school about ten years later. Lawton was a school of about 450 children and 17 primary language groups in the Magnolia neighborhood. The request leading to full inclusion came from a parent who asked me: "Can you build a program here so that kids can go to school with their friends?" The next week, this mother's son was scheduled to return to the third grade at a school 8 miles from their Seattle home. He'd be 1 of 10 mostly male students with challenging behavioral issues. Her son also had moderate level autism. She wasn't making the request for her own son, who would remain in his current school for a variety of reasons but for other children not yet in school who would benefit by going to the same school as their friends and siblings. Her sadness about what her son had missed from his separate, distant education prompted her to want something different for upcoming students. I won't tell you all of the steps that took place except to say that over the course of three years, the students, the full parent group, the entire staff—made inclusion become a reality at this school. There were countless meetings in every conceivable meeting format each year with all stakeholders—including the kids. Lawton children initiated a new school motto—"Work hard, have fun, and help each other" to reflect the diversified student body that they were seeing. Though parents and staff worked diligently on inclusion issues, the kids—all the kids—were the biggest motivating force for the full-time inclusion of students with moderate and severe disabilities. Neighborhood parents starting voting with their feet—Parents of 'Gifted and Talented' students who previously pulled their children out of Lawton to specialized advanced programs across the city returned their kids to this neighborhood school because of our diversity. Like Jowonio, it wasn't that Lawton had great founts of expertise in dealing with severely-involved kids with special needs; it was more that parents, staff, and kids believed that this was the right thing to do. We made lots and lots of mistakes but as time went on, we made fewer and less serious mistakes.

--One Lawton primary children with severe Down's Syndrome sometimes got triggered by hallway noise. On one particular afternoon as I was in the front hallway, an announcement came over the PA system—the noise stressed 7 year- old Devon who promptly collapsed on his back like a bug playing dead in the middle of the front entry hallway just as parents were coming into school to pick up their children. While I had a fair amount of expertise in working with behavioral challenges, I hadn't yet figured out how to handle Devon in these moments. I tried a few things that didn't work. The incoming parents –almost all of whom knew Devon—were probably thinking: "Devon one; Michael zero." At any other time of the day, I would have just given him safe support until he was ready to go of his own accord, but he needed to catch his bus. At what seemed like the very last second, a fourth grader who also happened to be named Devon—walked down the hall, approached us, put his hands on his knees and looked down at Devon, and said in a very loud voice that all on-lookers could hear: "Party!" I have no idea what that meant to prone-Devon or if the whole thing was some sort of Candid Camera event, but prone-Devon immediately got off his back, took older-Devon's hand, and the two of them walked down the hall to younger Devon's classroom to get his backpack. This dynamic happened everyday everywhere throughout school. It's why the kids developed that school

motto—especially the last part of “Help Each Other.” Its why instead of kids avoiding or walking around or remaining passive bystanders in troublesome situations, Lawton kids generally (not always, but generally) walked right into the middle of things as young problem-solvers and peers. This is what Paul has been preaching and writing about for the last two years—the willingness to reach out to one another even if we are feeling shy about doing so and even when being a non-involved bystander seems a more natural inclination. It’s the Lawton kids all over again using the “Help Each Other” phrase.

--I don’t want to suggest that everything was idyllic every day. The creation and protection of full inclusion—for everyone—took much effort. As I talked to Lawton teachers and parents in the years after I left, however, there was a general feeling that the work, the hard work, was joyous. It was very very hard for me to leave this community.

--After considering research, history, and the two schools, the question is why does inclusion work some places and not other places—what has to happen to make it work. And especially why are there difference in situations when the demographics are the similar.

-- A Syracuse mentor of mine many years ago termed this the “developmental twin” quandary. He cited an actual elementary school in Philadelphia with too many students in every class, with all sorts of neighborhood problems, with tired teachers, and all sorts of financial problems including a failing physical plant. In this school, inclusionary culture for all sorts of students thrived. He compared it to another nearby elementary school with all of the same challenging demographic issues where inclusion was non-existent, where kids with special needs were served in segregated settings and classrooms. He wondered why it worked in one school and why it didn’t work in another school. We could really ask the same about church settings?—why here and why not there, or visa versa, why does it work there and not here? What’s the difference.

--We’ll do a talk-back session in a couple of minutes, but I want to suggest a partial answer for schools....and by extension, faith communities. There is actually a lot of research about educational outcomes here—I won’t bore you with specific research—I’ll share only the conclusion. BELIEFS matter. When we want something to change in how we work, in how schools provide community, how churches push the diversity boundaries, it happens primarily because we believe it’s the right thing to do. At both Jowonio and Lawton, the technical preexisting expertise base didn’t exist—at least that’s what we thought. What existed was the belief in doing something to build community. And out of that belief came the later development of expertise and history in community building.

--If you saw Michael Moore’s latest film, “Where to Invade Next?” and If you doubt this “developmental twin” quandary, ask why he made the movie. For those of you who didn’t see it, it’s essentially another quirky Moore film in which he takes us to several other countries that provide fundamentally different services in areas such as health care, criminal justice, family leave, corporate accountability, and school nutrition that we don’t do so well in—countries that are far more successful and humane in serving their people because these nations BELIEVE it is the right thing to do. These aren’t countries with greater financial resources or talent bases—they just believe in doing things that are more people-responsive.

--Let me tell you one other reason from the research why inclusion works some places—related to BELIEF. It's RELATIONSHIP. It matters HOW we interact with other people. One way that I learned about this was from a beginning-of-the-year activity that I did almost every year in my work: I asked groups of teachers or parents or specialists or to think of an educator who made a significant difference in their lives. People pondered briefly about a few characteristics of why that person mattered in their lives. Sometimes we shared in pairs; sometimes in small groups; sometimes in the full group. What people said about the person who mattered was remarkably similar over the 30 or so years that I did this activity. It didn't matter if the person went to PS 193 in New York City or if they went to a one-room school house in Nebraska. The people who mattered were teachers, principals, custodians, secretaries, bus drivers, specialists, paraprofessionals—it didn't matter what their titles were. Everyone ALWAYS described the SAME PERSON. Someone who believed in them, who went a bit out of the way to advocate for them, who challenged them to do their best rather than settle for the easy way, who formed a relationship with them, who got to know them, who wasn't an uninvolved bystander. . . . Take a minute: think about a person who mattered to you—preferably an educator but it could be someone else. Think about the two most significant attributes of that person in how it affected your life's adventure. Share with a neighbor or two now.

--These two things—BELIEF in what's possible and the RELATIONSHIP between people who matter such as a teacher and child—are powerful in creating inclusive learning communities.

--All of this matters to children. But it matters just as much to the larger community. Studies—especially qualitative works that go back and do longitudinal analyses of how adults interact with other adults. . . strongly confirm that children raised in diverse, accepting communities become adults who seek and nurture diverse, accepting communities. Rather than rail - now about the obvious links to our current political and social climate characterized by much hatred, mocking, mistrust, multiple bigotry forms. . . . ponder a society where children are raised with natural diversity.

--Throughout these comments, I've left out a huge part of the story—families. Remember that inclusive communities benefit children—all children. But we need to understand the difference for families who live in places where the community understands and fulfills its responsibility in reaching out for all. Think of the cliché's about children being watched out for by many adults on the block. Think of Hilary Clinton's work with Marian Wright Edelman at the Children's Defense Fund that was described in her book "It takes a village." There are so many clichés that are true. It does "take a village".

--There are so many societal reasons why inclusion belief and practice matter. But I started with kids in this sermon. So here's why it really matters. Your child goes to birthday parties because it's something that all kids do. It isn't because a 'pity' or 'charity' invitation has been extended. It means that you can call another parent when you have another emergency babysitting need. It means that the meetings that you go to at school are about 'kindergarten' or 'third grade curriculum meetings'—not about special needs children. It means that you're not as isolated and alone. And it means that in the rare event when the worst happens—your child doesn't survive

their illness or their disability, that you have a community to grieve in because others have been part of your child's life. I've seen this too many times.

--A final point about inclusion and the two schools. While Jowonio and Lawton started their efforts with lots of intentional thinking about inclusion and how to use curriculum and social dynamics to support a more diverse children's community, both moved away from the intentional focus on capital I inclusion. Inclusion as an agenda item disappeared as it became simply the way that school was done.

--The talkback question that Paul and I have for you is: would you like to share an anecdote about how this approach to children's inclusion might apply to our intentions to expand the breadth and depth of all of our relationships?