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## Reflection on Booker T. Washington's "The Struggle for an Education"

Perhaps the greatest loss in the world of education today is the lost awareness of what education has meant to previous generations. No, that is not quite right. It is what education *means*, absolutely. Let me restate the proposition. Perhaps the greatest loss in the world of education is the awareness of what education *means*, what education *is*. Such an awareness is vividly described in Booker T. Washington's "The Struggle for an Education" (2008).

Washington's moving story stands in stark contrast with the attitudes that I see both in my 6th grade class and in society at large. This contrast is a source of deep frustration.

"The Struggle for an Education" is a chapter from Washington's autobiography, *Up From Slavery*. In the chapter, Washington describes his journey from the coalmines of West Virginia to Hampton Institute in his quest to obtain an education. I say "quest" because Washington's narrative has an epic, even mythic quality about it. He leaves the dark bowels of the earth (which we can read as a metaphor of the darkness of illiteracy and un-education), setting off on a difficult trek across Virginia to the Hampton Institute, a boarding school. The Institute sounds to him like "the greatest place on earth, and not even Heaven presented more attractions for me." He heads east, perhaps we can say towards a new dawn, towards the light. For Washington, education means enlightenment.

The journey, like any quest, is fraught with obstacles, including hunger, cold and exhaustion. Many people help him along the way. The journey has spiritual overtones. With fortuitous assistance from strangers, he triumphs over his obstacles, and reaches the object of his quest. When he arrives at Hampton, he has also arrived at the shining city where he will be reborn:

To me it had been a long and eventful journey; but the first sight of the large, three-story, brick school building seemed to have rewarded me for all that I had undergone in order to reach the place ... The sight of it seemed to give me new life. I felt that a new kind of existence had now begun -- that life would now have a new meaning. I felt that I had reached the promised land..."

Throughout the chapter, Washington infuses his story with the importance of the community that made his education possible and which he desires to serve. His community in West Virginia contributes "a nickel, a quarter, or a handkerchief" towards his quest. His education is an expression of not just his desire, but of his community's desire, members who "had spent the best days of their lives in slavery, and hardly expected to live to see the time when they would see a member of their race leave home to attend a boarding-school." He carries with him not just his own aspirations, but also those of his whole community, even all African Americans (and really, everyone). As such, he recognizes that education begets a deep responsibility to give back. Each person that helps him along on his quest reinforces his sense of responsibility and obligation. Upon reaching Hampton, Washington wrote, "I resolved to let no obstacle prevent me from putting forth the highest effort to fit myself to accomplish the most good in the world." At Hampton, Washington finds a selfless and committed community of learners, all preparing themselves for the Great Work: "The great and prevailing idea that seemed to take possession of every one was to prepare himself to lift up the people at his home. No one seemed to think of himself."

The twin themes of education as enlightenment and education as entailing a responsibility to give back to society have found a contemporary expression in the idea of education-as-liberation. Gutstein (2007) makes the connection explicit in connecting the struggle by African Americans for education that Washington documents with Paulo Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed." Freire sees literacy as not just learning to read words or construct meanings from

text, but also learning to *read the world*, and not just learning to read the world, but also learning to *write the world*. That is, literacy, and education in general, enables us to not just understand the world and its power structures and the workings of those power structures, but also to *change* the world and those power structures. Freire's ideas dovetail with the tradition of the African American struggle for education. Gutstein includes a wonderful quote from Theresa Perry that echoes Washington, and captures the theme of education as enlightenment, liberation and social obligation:

You pursued learning because this is how you asserted yourself as a free person, how you claimed your humanity. You pursued learning so you could work for the racial uplift, for the liberation of your people. You pursued education so you could prepare yourself to lead your people. (in Gutstein, 2007)

Today's statistics about the grossly skewed distribution of wealth, the social destruction of our neighborhoods, environmental destruction, etc. etc. -- the list is quite long -- indicates that the Great Work is not finished. There is much to be done. Education, as before, is the necessary precondition for liberation. However, education, like many public services is under attack via chronic under-funding, which leads to crowded classrooms, a shortage of supplies, and stressed teachers and students.

In my classroom experience, those problems are compounded by what appears to be a lack of appreciation on the part of my students for the opportunity of an education. Their attitude is a far cry from Washington's excitement about the opportunity to be in a classroom. At the same time, I cannot entirely fault my students. They are still children. Perhaps they are so overwhelmed by mass media or electronic entertainment or the lure of the street that school holds little interest. Perhaps they are too young to really understand what education makes possible, or what the future holds for them without an education. Or perhaps they do understand,

but see an effective education beyond their reach, and so are resigned to a bleak future. Maybe, like many adults, they do not believe that change is possible. I do not know. Frustration is too small of a word to describe my feelings about this. The problem is massive and difficult.

Massive and difficult as it is though, one can return to Washington for a profound reminder. The historic struggle to overthrow the slave system is testament to the ability of human beings to change the world. The problems that Washington faced in his post-Civil War struggle for an education are at least as big, if not bigger, than the struggle for education today. Washington's story projects the ever-important themes of education -- enlightenment, obligation and liberation, which my students need to hear. It can be an inspiration today not just for students, but for teachers as well. We prepare ourselves to lift up our people. The struggle continues.

#### References

- Gutstein, E. (2007). "'And that's just how it starts': Teaching mathematics and developing student agency." *Teacher's college record*. 109 (2), 420 - 448.
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