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THE PROMISE OF LIVING

*The promise of living
With hope and thanksgiving
Is born of our loving
Our friends and our labor.*

*The promise of loving
With faith and with knowing
Is born of our sharing
Our love with our neighbor.*

*The promise of living
The promise of growing
Is born of our singing
In joy and thanksgiving.*

-- Aaron Copland,
Excerpts from The Promise of Living

Schools are about the promise of living. They are not about organizational structures, power, procedures or management. They are about living, fully and completely, with the heart as well as the head, physically as well as intellectually, and intuitively as well as logically. Schools are not about materials and written curriculum. They are about relationships and interactions that form the nucleus around which learning and growth occur. As people experience diverse relationships, they learn more and more about themselves. Children do not become educated without the energy created from a deep connection with teachers, peers and others.

Yet the literature about schools gives you a different message. We have turned our schools into factories and complex organizations. We talk of power, decisions, authority and participation, from top-down to bottom-up to both-ends-toward-the-middle. We agonize over the distribution of power and control. These are the games adults' play. We are stuck in procedures and regulations and trapped in redesigning structures and policy. Schools have become enamored with systems, focused on management, and bloated with jargon. They have become cold, impersonal and competitive places concerned with test scores at a time when children need warm, caring and nurturing environments. We are reengineering, restructuring or reprogramming schools as if children are not a part of them. In the process, we have forgotten the nature of childhood and the process of growing up, complete with its joys and travails.

Instead, we should be giving thanks for our children. They all come to school with hope and love. They are full of anticipation and joy about learning and growing into adults. The curiosity and magic of a kindergarten classroom is testament to the natural excitement and energy children bring to school. It's natural, it's innocent and it's genuine. Fostering and building on those qualities, not destroying them through impersonal, mechanistic and factory-like environments, make schools special places that celebrate the unique destiny each child brings to this world.

Schools ought to be places where people have their heads in the clouds, not buried in the systems or policy manuals. Ideals drive schools, not procedures or regulations. Ideals are hard to define and reach because they float high in the sky beyond our fingertips, but always offering the allure of greatness. The pragmatists, on the other hand, wring the idealism and the serendipity out of schools. They want everything spelled out, all contingencies covered, and instantaneous measurable results. Schools are not about trivial, pragmatic outcomes: they must pursue profound and noble goals. They are serious places of learning with excitement and creativity, and the successes and failures that come with striving. Great teachers fuse poetry with purpose and imagination with reality. To get imaginative schools, we need to change how we perceive them.

The best metaphor for school is the concept of a sanctuary. The term sanctuary has a religious derivation. In ancient times, sanctuaries were the most sacred part of temples and were consecrated places that offered inviolable asylum, shelter and refuge. Children need schools that offer them the sanctity to be themselves, to learn and grow, and to take risks so they can garner the experience of life without paying devastating prices. In these “sanctuaries” human genius in all its forms is honored, and the efforts of children who persevere with intensity, drive, and integrity of purpose are applauded.

Schools as sanctuaries are not cold, impersonal tomb-like places. They have a deep sense of soul, a passionate spirit, and strong emotional bonds and intellectual challenge. These educational sanctuaries are:

- **Wonder-ful** -- The inexplicable wonder of learning is in the air because the imagination and creativity of children are not lost. Curiosity is more than a spelling word. Children are spontaneous and like to explore and ask off-beat questions or make the unusual comment that spurs more thought and reflection. Children and adults delight in the creative perception and the unique synthesis of ideas. The expressiveness of childhood is not lost as children share their views of the world and learn new things. We all learn through sharing stories and passing on traditions and ceremonies and we grow through experience and exploration. Innocence, with its reluctance to accept the conventional, is the catalyst that produces the magic of learning in its purist form.

- **Reverent** -- Wisdom is revered and all children have the opportunity to gain information and knowledge and see how both the head and the heart are important in life. Regardless of their ability or station in life, children learn their responsibilities and obligations and experience those things that would be unimaginable without the guidance and affectionate prodding of teachers or mentors. Education is valued because it liberates the mind and the spirit by helping students break self-imposed limitations and boundaries. It cultivates the boundless potential of their lives.

Children's learning is important work and needs to be perceived that way by everyone in schools. That work is to be cherished for it comes from the minds of children and is evidence of their developing minds and destiny. Too frequently we think the work of children is less valuable than that of adults. In some schools, children's work is interrupted, ignored or trivialized, when in fact, it is as important to children as what their parents produce on their jobs. Work is to be revered because it is the expression of the human spirit.

- **Passionate** -- Schools, as sanctuaries, are not places of ambivalence and neutrality. They abound with passion, just like the children within them. Educating children invokes strong, deep feelings of excitement and efficacy where passion is transformed into commitment. This passion drives teachers and others to create places of joy and learning for children in a happy and cheerful environment. People driven by passion cannot create anything less. Passion is the ground in which commitment and energy are anchored. Passion, coupled with perseverance, gives birth to the music of our imagination.
- **Connected** -- In schools with a soul there is a feeling that children belong and are connected to the people within the school as well as those in the outside world. These connections are important. As sanctuaries, schools are clear on their values and ideals, they build strong bonds with children and their families.

Children are not "customers" who have a fleeting interaction and whose connection with the school is based on mercenary motives like profit or ego. They are more like family members who need long-term attention and care through unbreakable emotional bonds. These bonds allow children to feel safe to explore the outside world and see where and how they fit into it. In addition, children see the connection of knowledge and concepts between the disciplines, and recognize the similarities in how people think across disciplines. Children connect thinking and feeling and become fully aware of all of their faculties and senses. They understand that the heart and the intellect are equally important, and they begin to see themselves as competent, complete people.

As children grow and move through the various stages of development, they require nurturing and support. Some are confident and others feel the pressure for acceptance of themselves and others. At times children can feel like damaged goods as they make their way through life. David Whyte, in his poem, "What to Remember When Waking", has a wonderful stanza about our relationship to the greater world and ourselves. He says,

You are not
A troubled guest
on this earth,
you are not
an accident
amidst other accidents
you were invited
from another and greater

night
than the one
from which
you have just emerged.

Children, as well as all of us, have to remember that we are not mistakes, but instead are divine beings interconnected by our humanity and here on earth to contribute our unique gifts and purpose. Schools are not as much molders as they are nurturers of the talent and gifts we have within us. In this regard, there are no ‘over-achievers’ because if a child performs, they had that ability inside of them, sometimes buried in a corner of their heart and soul that standardized measures cannot detect or assess.

- **Focused on Purpose** -- In these schools everyone is a learner -- children and adults. They share the excitement of learning something new and of struggling with mastering new things. The curriculum reflects strong academic understandings in all the disciplines and not just employment skills.

Children also gain an understanding of the difficult problems with which human beings must wrestle and realize that in order to create solutions to them it takes a heart with its entire range of emotions and feelings, in addition to brainpower. Too frequently children get the idea that heads are more important than hearts because schools are so driven by cognitive goals. Schools as sanctuaries cherish the intellect and celebrate matters of the heart. They nurture character, as well as knowledge and skills.

- **Idealistic** -- Strong ideals that are very difficult, if not impossible, to reach exemplify schools that are sanctuaries. Because the ideals are lofty and noble, people in the school become better simply by striving to reach them. Excellence comes from the stretch to reach the unattainable and to question what is. There is no settling for pedestrian goals of basic literacy or application skills. Sanctuaries pursue virtue, justice, beauty, equality, goodness, liberty, and democracy. These schools discuss these issues and teach students about them so they can gain the wisdom to act on them.

- **Safe** -- Children have a right to feel safe physically, emotionally and intellectually. Safety of the mind and spirit, as well as body, needs to be a part of every school. In today's world safety is viewed narrowly in terms of physical violence. But children need protection from verbal assaults, emotional muggings, and intellectual attacks. They need the warmth of compassion to express feelings and emotions, the security to express ideas no matter how divergent or imaginative, and the assurance that they do not have to worry about their physical safety. Adults are careful with children, respecting them as people, and providing care and nurturing for all students. In safe schools, there are no haves and have-nots, chosen ones and outcasts. There is no mold all children must fit. All children are safe to be who they are; as products of their heritage, parents, potential and experience.

Of Ideals, Imagination and Courage

As sanctuaries, schools are special places because in them souls, spirits, and intellects are tightly coupled. Children learn what's important in life and what isn't. Getting a job is important but it isn't the sole reason children need an education. A curriculum must be based on issues all of us face in life, whether as adults or children. Our children need to consider the great questions of justice, liberty, equity, beauty, virtue, truth and goodness. All of the disciplines, in one way or another, address one or more of them. Aren't they the issues around which we build our public lives? Aren't our personal relationships and interests wrapped in these issues? Don't the academics, fine arts, trades, technology and extra-curricular activities revolve around them?

Too frequently, though, we really do not believe that students can come to grips with important philosophical issues. So we package programs in an array of practical experiences or rote worksheets as if pragmatism is all that matters in life. But reality requires that children need to gain wisdom about abstract issues like liberty and justice so they can have an intellectual and moral structure to cope with the practicalities of life. Children can gain knowledge, skills, understanding and wisdom in academics and other areas if they are given the chance to think with their heads and to feel with their hearts. Searching for truth is a factor of the heart working with the head, rather than the brain functioning alone.

Sanctuaries allow for imagination. Children's imagination is a mark of genius and humanness. Seeing opportunities in dark times is a factor of imagination. Having the ability to confront and deal with problems resourcefully is a part of imagination. Cooperating or competing requires inspiration and creativity. Imagination creates vision that is fresh, inspired and poetic. It moves beyond the expected and conventional into a whole new way of perceiving and understanding.

To be imaginative in school or the world requires courage. Courage is a matter of heart. Pushing against the grain, standing up for principles, and holding ones own against peers, conventional wisdom and "the way we always do things" takes strength of character. There are many smart people with comprehensive knowledge and skill who do nothing in the face of adversity. They may be afraid of consequences or lack confidence.

Children must learn that there are many heroes in life, not just those spotlighted on television and in movies. Heroes are individuals just like themselves who act on strong feelings and high spirit that is an outgrowth of principle and conviction. They have the mental strength to continue, persevere and withstand pressure because they have moral confidence that encourages and sustains themselves and others. Bravery is necessary for everyone to survive in life at one time or another. It is certainly a pragmatic requirement at work and in the world. Imagination and courage are encouraged and appreciated, along with content, skills and knowledge, need to be cultivated in schools.

We must jettison the old view of schools as bureaucratic organizations that should run like businesses and look at the "bottom line" of profit margin. These places often put adult learning over children's and see themselves as "molders" of children's lives, where competition and material success are fundamental. These schools are prevalent because of society's short-term view of trying to find a cure for schools based on the needs of businesses and the market place.

We must also jettison the fear of failure. We fear not measuring up and quake in the face of change and its impact on us. Fear drives out compassion and it destroys creativity and drive. It saps our emotional and intuitive resources and causes us to rely on measurable and “scientific” solutions that stand the test of linear logic. Most people still have a very fragmented view of education and life itself. We have worshipped on the alter of linear science to the point that we cannot see the complex whole that constitutes what being educated means – and what being human means.

But there are forces that are propelling educators, parents and citizens to see with new eyes. People today are searching for a sense of connection to each other, to their community and to something larger than themselves. They need purpose to drive out the encroaching hollowness that contemporary life can create. That hollowness of diversion, trivial pursuits, and cynicism can only be thwarted by a sense of one's soul and viewing the world through the emotional and moral portals of ones' heart and through the lens of cognitive logic. In our hearts we all want to trust in the invisible, abstract forces of virtue, values, goodness, justice, beauty and liberty. These magnets of the head and heart can attract new ideas, commitment, and imagination.

In schools with a sense of their soul and virtue, educators and parents see with new eyes. They create sanctuaries that have the whole child as the center of the experience. They develop a sense of community around educating children, and they develop an on-going dialogue about the discrepancy between "what is" and "what can be". The focal point is long-term care for the children. In these environments, children are appreciated for their uniqueness. There is an unwavering commitment to respecting each child and the talents they possess, and to ensuring the success and development of each.

The Second World of the inner self takes precedence so that at the end of their formal education each child feels a sense of wholeness of head and heart, and grasps the meaning of happiness. Children are not molded, but instead are allowed to find themselves through the interactions they have with people, ideas, and experiences.

Finally, in order to fulfill the promise of living, schools must have a spirit of loyalty and courage. We must be loyal to the wonderment of childhood in all its stages. We must examine it and nourish it and value it as deeply as we cherish adulthood. We must look through the eyes of a child and focus the lens of reform so that change will improve the quality of life for all children. To do so takes courage because open discussion of schools as sanctuaries and matters of the heart brings scoffing and charges of naiveté from those whose perception is stuck in the quicksand of engineering and pragmatism. To be an idealist takes courage, and to champion the cause of educating children in matters of the intellect and the heart takes true heroism.

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