

BOYS AND GIRLS CONSTRUCTED

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The recent flap over Harvard President Lawrence Summers' remarks regarding an inherent incapacity of women to excel at mathematics and science put me in mind of a moment in the mid 1970's, when two psychologists, one from Harvard, the other from Berkeley, advanced the notion that, given their scores on standardized intelligence tests, black Americans should be deemed genetically inferior to whites. To say the least, the ensuing debate over these assertions was incendiary. Only naturally, both sides raised the matter of the ultimately unmeasurable nature of intelligence generally, as well as the alleged cultural bias of so-called intelligence tests. I remember well the discussion of race and intelligence as being little more than social constructs. I remember too, the pride I felt scoring at the moron level on a black authored IQ test, a score that landed me in a rather high percentile among white folks.

The dispute over the alleged inferiority of African Americans generated a host of academic conferences on intelligence which, interestingly, turned almost at once to matters of intelligence testing. Why bother to conceptualize and codify the mystery of intelligence when all you have to do, seemingly, is define intelligence as that thing intelligence tests measure.

One such conference was held in 1970 at The University of Illinois. It proceeded with a relatively large group of African American students literally fuming at almost every word uttered by an all white panel of experts. Finally, the crowd prepared itself for Dr. David Wechsler, the creator of what is still the most well known test of intelligence. If anyone could calm the fury of the students, Professor Wechsler was that person. Here now, almost verbatim, were Professor Wechsler's words, words incidentally, that in fact did silence those outraged students.

"No one can say with accuracy what intelligence means. In fact, there probably are lots of intelligences. Certainly all of us can do things that others of us cannot do. For example, when I was a boy I played basketball with colored boys, and against them, I didn't stand a Chinaman's chance!"

The morale of this story, for clearly there is nothing moral about it, is that we tacitly agree to distract ourselves from the meaning of complicated matters like mathematical or scientific intelligence, or, for that matter, the meaning of being female or male, by speaking instead about race or sex differences on standardized tests. This indulgence in social constructs, the very indulgence exhibited by President Summers, represents not only the apogee of scientism, it is patent distraction. Content with our methodologies and conclusions, we then engage in unadulterated reification: We construct unambiguous fact out of test scores, and hence we not only convince ourselves that we comprehend the nature of a mathematical capacity, we believe moreover, that we can measure this form of intelligence and attribute its presence to purely neurological origins.

Proffering all sorts of wondrous adages about the value of education while failing, often, to support many schools, students, and teachers, our culture nonetheless holds intelligence to be a supreme commodity. It is high intelligence, apparently, that many parents crave for their children, and hence are willing to pour millions of dollars into educational toys meant to raise their child's IQ score. Yet, in the minds of some, intelligence appears to be little else than that "thing" intelligence tests measure. Accordingly, we invest in a multi-million dollar testing industry as if we truly knew what intelligence is, how it "grows" in us, and why, allegedly, it appears to grow more in some of us than in others. "There is a human temptation," Howard Gardner wrote, "to give credence to a word to which we have become attached. . . Intelligence is such a word. We use it so often we have come to believe in its existence as a genuinely tangible,

measurable entity rather than as a way of labeling some phenomena that may (or may well not) exist"

Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences offers, perhaps, one of the more reasonable clarifications on this subject. According to the theory, females and males alike are born with the potential to develop any one or all of nine distinct intelligences, each of them allowing us to create products or solve problems which the culture deems valuable. It all seems logical enough, for do we not agree that athletes, sculptors, and scientists reveal unique forms of intelligence? Yet, when push comes to shove, we tend to fall back on the notion that "real" intelligence is the sum of one's verbal and mathematical scores. How ironic that colleges grant honorary degrees to people whose discipline is not represented in the college's curriculum.

Children label themselves smart or dumb along these same lines. They believe so strongly in these appellations and self assessments, no one, seemingly, can argue them out of their conclusions. A girl just "knows" she cannot "do" math. A boy feels, well, weird, about his budding gift for writing poetry. More generally, children recognize something else: We tell them they are our most precious resource, but our priorities belie this claim. We cannot be surprised, therefore, that a fifth grader in a Massachusetts school would hear about program cuts in his school and ask his mother: "What's the matter, don't they like us?"

Everyone has a clue, personally felt, to when they have reached the boundary marker of their inner voice. Some experience an exhilaration or lightness, some feel as if they have encountered their own brain or mind, and some feel as if they have become larger than life, or perhaps have become invisible. In some respects, the search for the inner voice and one's genuine

intelligences, not the intelligences a culture has constructed for a particular race or gender or age group, constitutes a meditation. Is it possible, therefore, that the inner world reveals itself to us, literally rises within us, as if it were always there, just waiting for the "right" time and "right" conditions.

For some philosophers, this "calling up" process is precisely what learning itself is all about. In writing about Plato's *Meno*, for example, Stephen Tigner writes: "Learning is called recollection inasmuch as it involves drawing upon one's own resources in raising up knowledge from within." Descartes too, speaks to this matter of drawing up from within when he writes: "...it is not so much that I seem to learn anything new, but that I recall something I already knew. That is, I first notice things that were already in me, although I had not directed a mental gaze toward them."

The critical point is that recollecting or the lifting up of knowledge" is one of personal exploration. It goes without saying that without respect for or belief in myself, this calling up action is impossible. It also goes without saying that I must be taught this self respect and self acceptance. And how are these delicate qualities taught? Presumably by parents and teachers, and the creators of social constructs like intelligence, and gender. In this regard, one is reminded of Thoreau's words: "The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things."

But now this private exploration and intellectual cleaving meet the forces of distraction which ask us either to disregard the truths of our selves, or act as if we really knew these truths. If ever there were an educational process of piling on it is the process of distraction. Given that our social economy asks us to fill our consciousness with newer and still newer stimuli, there is little possibility of anyone turning what Descartes called their mental gaze on any phenomenon for more than a milli-second. But isn't it the case that those of us in universities are

supposed to combat this distractive impulse by slowly working our way through the most complicated mysteries of our being, like gender itself? Keep in mind, biologists still don't know for certain what makes an embryo female, although they do have a sense of what makes it male. Search and discovery, the backbone of research and perhaps the greatest goals of education, are explicitly negated in distraction, if not openly assaulted.

Children who find their voice and learn to embrace it cannot possibly be (or feel) dumb, and good teachers know this; they will find the means by their students' voices may be heard. In turn, children learn that their voice will always be there, and, moreover, it is a good voice. Be it an artistic voice, a mathematical or athletic voice, a female or male voice, it will be heard. For it is this voice that allows children to know that they are the people they truly are. Ultimately, it will be with pride that a boy will read his poetry, a girl present the results of her scientific experiments.

If one of the challenges of human life that in many respects defines our individuality is that of finding our voice, then determining what, precisely, finding one's voice even means is an equally daunting endeavor. If, moreover, the search for truth involves a search for and a calling up of genuine knowledge about something, even one's self, and not merely a collection of piled on facts, then the search also must involve the ongoing pursuit of Thoreau's cleaver, fixing one's mental gaze, and ultimately discovering and protecting one's own personal truths, one's inner voice, one's genuine being.

Somewhere along the line, amidst all our public acting, amidst our being in the world, we begin to discover what genuinely constitutes our being, our personality, our authentic roles. Those who have embarked on the proverbial road less traveled, proclaim they have found what they were meant to do, which puts them on the path to this grand discovery. Some people make the discovery

early in childhood. Others don't find it even when they have fallen right into the middle of it, and still others die never knowing for certain where that precious voice resided, although they may have sensed they hadn't lead the lives they were meant to lead.

There is a sign, etched in stone actually, on one of the gates leading into the Yard at Harvard University. It reads: "Enter to grow in wisdom." Above the sign, if memory serves me right, is the Harvard crest containing the Latin word *veritas* (truth). Perhaps this small entry into an esteemed university, an institution not without its own distractions, may provide us a valuable guide post. Genuine wisdom does seem a reasonable antidote to distraction, for by definition its acquisition becomes a life long endeavor involving exquisite investigation, examination, and discovery. But especial clues may lie in those words "truth" and "enter."

When truth and morality are avoided, when we outright lie to one another, and ourselves, when we live by reified constructs of what constitutes male and female, for example, we merely stoke the fires of distraction that daily burn away the fabric of the culture, as well as individual souls. The fires are stoked as well, when I lie to myself, escape from myself, or, significantly, find myself turned away from the gate granting me entrance into my inner world where my genuine capabilities, intelligences, and unique voices reside and sit ready to be called up.

Americans have built industries from the words, "In the pursuit of happiness." But no one, to my knowledge, guaranteed us that the pursuit itself would be a happy experience. It ought to be a truthful one, but the journey often evokes sadness and pain, particularly at those moments when, through the faulty examinations of those in power, those who construct the constructs, refuse to strip away all variety of distractions, leaving us, and our entire culture for that

matter, unable to find a single authentic facet of our own maleness, our own femaleness, our own being.

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