

The Gentle Rain from Heaven
(Concluding Conference Remarks)
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Irmgard Hantsche provided us a thoughtful synopsis; I'm going to give you a "reflection" on education for democracy.

Just so you know the format, I will be speaking for two minutes, then you will have 90 seconds for comments, and then I will have 30 seconds for rebuttal. Not really.

Our conference papers and discussions about educating new citizens enriched and reinforced many of my perceptions. It seems that people agree that for effective education for democracy we need well-prepared teachers, good curricular standards, sustained and systematic coursework, and appropriate assessments—all things that most American school districts lack at present. Unlike in Hamburg, as described by Wolfgang Boege, in the US—other than overcoming language barriers—there isn't that much difference between the education of new citizens and the education of native-born citizens, as the natives don't know much more than the new, as Dan Prinzing noted. So, in all honesty, my perspective has not really changed between Sunday and today, though my knowledge has been greatly expanded.

But I have been struck by some changes outside of civic education that seem remarkable, when viewed from the perspective of relatively recent history.

One change is that Germany understands itself to be an immigration country and its naturalization process has gotten more streamlined and broadly understood. It seems amazing to contemplate that only 20 years ago, when someone asked at one of these conferences how one became a naturalized German citizen, not one of the German political scientists knew the answer. The answer was supplied by an Italian political scientist, as I recall, someone whose countrymen had a pressing interest in the subject at that time.

More recently than that, in Mexico the people have changed from subjects, to subjects in rebellion, to citizens. And civic education has changed from pure nationalism and patriotism to something more like the enlightened community participant.

And surely the United States has changed. Our wars are more pre-emptive, our national debt is larger, our electorate is more deeply divided, and our fences are higher and longer. But I suppose the perception of the US as a country that respects human rights at home while selectively overlooking violations abroad has not changed. Let us hope that we are not inadvertently recreating Athenian democracy's demise.

Although there is much that is imperfect about America and its democracy and its relations to new arrivals, I think we civic educators need to continue to underscore the positive elements as a counterbalance to the reductive approach of much of the media. We need to tell the positive immigration stories, such as the children of Cuban

immigrants in Florida of which we heard who had won the We the People competition. We need to ensure that our critiques of our imperfect system are accurate, but not so harsh as to convert healthy skeptics to cynics. We need to allow our students to envision civic success stories that are within their grasp. We need to be optimists; we are citizens and parents and teachers and constitutional patriots and experimenters in ordered liberty.

Speaking of changes, in New York nearly thirty years ago I was asked—probably by a graduate student working on a thesis—who my heroes were. Two names came immediately to mind: Elliott Richardson, who had stood up to a president of his own party and resisted an injustice, and Ralph Nader. While I haven't changed my mind about Richardson, I've changed my mind about Ralph, the erstwhile truth-teller. Perhaps if he becomes a contemporary hero as described in Diana Owen's paper—if he puts out an album of gangsta rap and signs contracts with Nike and the Los Angeles Lakers—I'll reconsider. Or, as we say these days, I'll flip flop.

I note that San Diego's been very very good to us. The camaraderie of the conference has been enhanced by the climate—which is nearly as good as Los Angeles—and the setting.

San Diego is rather distant in every way from Elizabethan England. And yet San Diego has its own Globe theatre, and one can see some fine Shakespearean productions here. Perhaps because one could see the Globe theatre in the distance from the bus on Wednesday or perhaps it was the border; for whatever reason I thought of the quality of mercy.

As Portia said, "The quality of mercy is not strain'd, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes." The Border Patrol, at least as interpreted by Officer Nick Coates, sees its work as humane—indeed, merciful. Under the circumstances, I'm sure most of the people it collects would beg to differ, and I apologize to our Mexican friends if the trip to the border offended your sensibilities. But it was educational to most of us.

Meadowbrook Middle School was very good to us and educational as well. It is a tonic to the soul to witness classes in which the students clearly are learning both the knowledge and the skills that will help them in the exercise of citizenship. Students in at least one class seemed to grasp basic concepts such as natural rights and social contract. I noted that one student cited his "right to go to school," a right not guaranteed by the US constitution. Happily for him, he lives in California, with its own constitution. In a country steeped in its own exceptionalism, California (or should I pronounce it "Kollyfornya" like the Governor?) is clearly the most exceptional state. A Mexican heritage, a German-speaking governor, it represents the heterogeneity of America.

And yet, in a state that once embodied the American dream, California is, in the opinion of author Gregory Rodriguez, seen through a cloud of gloom by much of the Anglo population. Historian Kevin Starr says that "Anglos are pouting." Despite being the wealthiest group in the state, they are most likely to think that California's best days are

past. Perhaps because the Anglo population is aging, perhaps because the newcomers to the state are largely non-white, they see the enormous international migration from around the world as a bad thing, and California as Paradise Lost. Demographer William Frey describes this as a “racial generation gap.” This gap would be less important if Anglos were not still the principal taxpayers in the state, and if their anti-tax leadership were not reluctant to invest in newcomers and their children with the kind of massive public investment that marked the state half a century ago. Rodriguez calls for a re-creation of the social contract that built postwar California. All of the Californians in this room—the true Californians, who still believe in the dream of a good life, however altered—undoubtedly agree. But many disagree.

Of course, disagreement is a fact of life. Is dual citizenship reductive or enriching? Is multiculturalism dead? Should non-citizens whose children attend public schools have the right to vote for school board members? What is the best model of democratic citizenship? Should citizens be treated as “customers” and “consumers”? Are the identities of people living in two cultures enriched or eroded? Should there be a citizenship test for voting? Is democracy working well enough? Are Americans still inherently optimistic?

To the latter question I have already said that we need to be, so I venture to respond yes, though far less so than in 2000. To another question--Are we humble, I would answer that I don't think we are humble enough. Four years ago in a debate Mr. Bush said that America needed to be humble. We all agreed. We haven't seen much of it from Washington these past four years, of course. An America that is somewhat less certain of its “rightness” and its righteousness would be welcomed by our allies.

To my mind, some of the best moments in this conference series over the years have underscored the need for humility. In the past three years we have contemplated Japanese-American internment in World War II, the Neuengamme concentration camp near Hamburg, and the specter of hundreds of people each year dying in their attempts to enter the United States. As tragic as they were, the first two of these somehow seem more “solvable” for a civilized society than the third. Even though most Americans don't see illegal immigrants as the “other”—as beings different enough in kind to be denied their life and liberty in their native land—they don't want to let everyone into the country. They fear that the quantities of people en route to the US cannot be acculturated quickly enough to leave the civic culture intact—at least not all the elements of the civic culture they wish to retain. As Rainer Tetzlaff pointed out with his magic square, the many goals are in conflict. There is no perfect solution, no paradise.

If there is one thing we know, it is that Paradise—any earthly paradise, anyway—never lasts. People flock to it until it degrades to something less idyllic. Paradise is a vision, a state of mind.

Speaking of paradise, I was camping last Friday and Saturday with my son's Boy Scout troop in the Angeles National Forest along the East Bank of the San Gabriel River. We camped under a stand of pine and oak trees, near the rushing river. During the day we

taught the boys fly fishing, including how to land the artificial fly on the water as if it were a live insect, trying to fool the fish into biting. This was not intended to be an allegory for politics and the media, though I suppose it could be seen that way.

The camp site was a verdant area—for southern California, in any event—and people hiked the nearby trails, many to the locally famous “Bridge to Nowhere,” a bridge deep in the canyon that is no longer is used for vehicle traffic. Yet on Monday the Rangers closed the forest. It is fire season. The rain has been scarce for too long, the tinder is dry, the potential for an inferno too high to risk any longer. The metaphor applies all too well with the Iraq war, with the “conflict of civilizations,” or with the political alienation that we discussed this week.

The global democratic surge since 1989 has seen some reverses, and much of the heady international optimism of that time has abated in the face of 9/11 terrorism, and war and seemingly intractable problems, like humanity’s deep capacity for nursing hatreds. Good people hope the global political course since 9/11 has not been over a bridge to nowhere. But our work—our mutual and separate efforts—require us to see and build a brighter democratic future, to build a bridge to a somewhere worth finding. Let us work to see that democracy is not lost in the fire season, so that the gentle rain from heaven may cleanse and refresh the earth.