

Aims of Education XV 2007-08
The Power of Education
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Foreword by James L. Doti, Ph.D.
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The Aims of Education address, first presented in 1993, has become a cherished Chapman University tradition over the years. The idea behind this speech is to spotlight the quest for knowledge and the search for truth through the perspectives of our distinguished faculty members. It's my pleasure each year to select a faculty member – representing one of our wide range of academic disciplines – to deliver this address to new students and parents at our Opening Convocation in the fall.

For our 15th annual address, I was honored to invite Dr. Jennifer Keene, professor of history and chair of our Department of History, to share her thoughts on education. I knew that Dr. Keene, a noted expert on the First World War and the experiences of everyday Americans in that war, would offer us a uniquely historical perspective on the transformative power of education. And so she has, in this wonderful essay about the power of one man to change the way a society thinks and behaves.

We have seen that force in action here at Chapman – coincidentally enough, in the story of one of our own staff members who was honored at the same Opening Convocation, at which Dr. Keene spoke. Michael Belay, an officer working for Chapman's Public Safety Department, is a native of Ethiopia and, on several trips back home, saw the hopeless poverty in which the people – particularly the children – of his hometown were living. He was determined to do something to help them. So he sold his own family home here in Southern California to raise money to build a school for the children in Ethiopia, and started a foundation to raise funds to build a clinic, water purification system and more. Chapman honored Officer Belay with its Albert Schweitzer Award of Excellence, named for the great humanitarian who is Chapman's "guiding spirit." Like the photographer Jacob Riis in Dr. Keene's address, and like Dr. Schweitzer himself, Michael Belay knows that one person with courage and determination can change the world – by making at least one small corner of it better.

That is the essence of a Chapman education: to teach our students that they can make the world a better place; that they can, in the words of Albert Schweitzer, "search and see whether there is not some place where you may invest your humanity." Dr. Keene's address eloquently underlines this crucial aim of education, and we share it with you in the hope that it will inspire you as well.

-James L. Doti

The Power of Education

It was a great honor to receive President Doti's invitation to welcome the Class of 2011 to Chapman University by giving the annual Aims of Education

address at the Opening Convocation of the academic year. I have been thinking a lot about the aims of education, mostly because my son just graduated from kindergarten and in his diploma packet his teachers inserted a copy of the 1986 essay "All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten," by Robert Fulghum. I was curious to read this essay and find out if this was true, worried that I might have been wasting my time, and that of my students, all these years. "Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandbox at nursery school," Fulghum wrote. "Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people." He reiterates this message of social responsibility at the end of the essay: "No matter how old you are, when you go out in the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together."

I finished the essay reassured that we are not done learning at the age of five. I was impressed, however, with Fulghum's emphasis on the socializing aspects of an education. His essay indeed highlights a fundamental purpose that Americans attach to the educational process. We learn to try to make the world a better place, whether through social reforms, new inventions, medical advances, greater awareness of the harm we do or to discover the power that we have to undo wrongs of the past. Yet we also pursue education for our own selfish purposes. When prospective students visit Chapman, we emphasize how they will learn to think critically, write effectively, as well as acquire essential knowledge that will help them build satisfying and lucrative careers. We emphasize the personal gains that an education brings to justify the time it takes to pursue a rigorous university education. Finally, as a university filled with multiple disciplines, we embrace different strategies for reaching these various educational goals. Some classes emphasize books and ideas; others embrace experiential learning.

The purpose of the Aims of Education address is to explore the quest for knowledge and truth in a particular discipline. For a historian, this opens up a myriad of possibilities, but I have chosen today to examine how one individual acted upon these aims of education: social purpose, individual benefits, and intellectual and experiential learning. To these educational goals, I am going to add a fourth: creating your own place in history. I want to discuss the legacy of Jacob Riis.

Jacob Riis was a Danish immigrant who came to the United States in 1870. After a few tough years living in New York City slums, he found work as a newspaper reporter and revisited his old haunts, this time reporting rather than expecting the crime that pervaded these disadvantaged areas of the city. Influenced by the ideals of the Progressive reform movement, Riis increasingly joined with reformers of his era who felt that government regulation could put a stop to many social ills such as crime, overcrowding, poor sanitation, alcoholism and child abuse. This was by no means a unanimous view. Americans have traditionally embraced the ideal of individual responsibility, and the upper and middle classes tended to see poverty as a reflection of an individual's poor choices, character, or – given the prevalence of racial prejudices of the time – one's inferior genetic makeup.

In addition, many in the middle and upper classes worried about governmental regulation interfering with the property rights of landlords. Once the government started insisting that tenement landlords install indoor plumbing or electricity, these regulations could set a dangerous precedent for future government intervention in other industrial or commercial enterprises. You may recognize these

themes. These same conflicting ideas inform our present societal debate over the causes of poverty and governmental activism. In 1890, Riis set out to change people's minds, and he proposed a radical new way to make his case about the need for government regulation to clean up the tenements. He would show people how the other half lived.

Riis resolved to take the upper and middle classes on a tour of the tenements by showing them photographs of the dismal conditions there. He thus pioneered a reform strategy that has become quite familiar in our visually saturated culture: using images to create the momentum for social change. Yet, if it is true that a photograph is worth a thousand words, it is also true that it can take ten thousand words to properly understand an image. Riis's photographs did not speak for themselves; he gave them a specific meaning by carefully selecting what he would photograph, and then directed how the public interpreted his photographs by providing commentary that gave each image an unambiguous meaning.

Riis's work is complex; his book *How the Other Half Lives* is much more than a series of distressing photographs. Riis made several assumptions in his quest to educate the public about the tenements and his effort to persuade them that government regulation was the answer. First, he had complete faith in the desire of most people to do the right thing. The dismal state in the tenements, he believed, was due to public ignorance, not malice. Once he informed the public of the truth, he was certain that they would demand a change. Secondly, he held firmly to the tenet that emotion was a powerful agent of social change. Images, he concluded, were more powerful than words in creating the empathy and emotion that motivated people to act. Finally, he confronted the key debate over the causes of poverty: was it the individual's fault or a result of the environment? Riis was not immune from the ethnic and racial prejudices of his time, but he put great emphasis on the role that environment played in deadening the ambition of even the most talented individual to climb out of the filth and debauchery that characterized inner-city tenements.

The importance of words to construct a framework of meaning for Riis's images becomes immediately apparent when viewing his image of a tenement courtyard filled with trash. Without text it provokes competing interpretations that reflect the contemporary debate over the causes of poverty. Who is to blame for the trash there? Are the residents, who throw their trash into the courtyard without regard to the rats and stench that their neighbors must bear as a result of their thoughtless actions? Or is it the landlord's fault for failing to pay a contractor to haul his tenants' trash away to the city dump? Riis put together these two propositions somewhat differently. By failing to haul the trash away, landlords not only created an environment where trash accumulated, but they taught their residents to disrespect all shared spaces. The trash-filled courtyard shapes the character of residents, turning them into people who feel no responsibility to their neighbors nor feel any duty to take care of where they live.

In contrast, Riis praised immigrant women for their heroic efforts to keep their homes and children clean. These are individuals who have not succumbed to the contaminating influences of the tenement that rot away all sense of decent living. Although they may have lost their sense of collective responsibility for the courtyard,

their selfish desire to keep their own children healthy and clean and their interest in maintaining an image of respectability motivates these women to spend hours a day hauling water, heating it, and then bending over washtubs as they scrub their families' clothes on a wooden washboard with raw and reddened hands. According to Riis, cleanliness is indeed next to godliness. Take another look at the photograph of freshly laundered sheets and clothes hung out to dry in the same tenement courtyards filled with trash below, Riis tells his readers. "They are poverty's honest badge, these perennial lines of rags hung out to dry... The true line drawn between pauperism and honest poverty is the clothesline. With it begins the desire to be clean that is the first and the best evidence of a desire to be honest." It was the honest and hardworking poor that Riis wanted to help.

Some of the poor are beyond society's reach, Riis admits. He tells a charming story of convincing a tramp to let Riis take his photograph for ten cents. As the tramp sat down on a barrel to pose for the photograph, he removed his pipe from his mouth and puts it in his pocket. When Riis asked him to put the pipe back in his mouth for a more authentic shot, the tramp replied by demanding another 25 cents to include the pipe in the picture. "The man, scarce ten seconds employed at honest labor, even at sitting down, at which he was an undoubted expert, had gone on strike," Riis recalled. While he admired the man's gumption, Riis felt it would be nearly impossible to re-instill pride and self-sufficiency in people who had relied so long on charity. The key was to ensure that the honest poor did not join their ranks. To Riis, the best place to halt the decline into pauperism, and the best chance of gaining public sympathy for the poor lay with focusing on how tenements ruined the lives of children.

Riis paid particular attention to "street arabs," his term for children whose parents had thrown them onto the streets of children who had run away from home. His portraits of "street arabs" were intended to tug on the heartstrings of middle-class families. By this point, the middle class had embraced the notion of childhood as a magical time in life that should be devoted to play. Virtually every aspect of these children's existence countered that expectation.

Consider the serene scene of small tots kneeling in a semicircle before their beds in a privately run home for abused and rescued children, Riis wrote. "It is one of the most touching sights in the world to see a score of babies, rescued from homes of brutality and desolation, where no other blessing than a drunken curse was ever heard, saying their evening prayers at bedtime," he noted, echoing the views of middle-class parents examining the photograph. Riis admitted, however, that the photo did not tell the complete truth, concealing a most important bit of information. "Too often their white nightgowns hide tortured little bodies and limbs cruelly bruised by inhuman hands," he explained.

The photos of children living on the streets, curled up next to one another for comfort and warmth, were intended to create a groundswell of middle-class anger. These moving images tugged on the heartstrings of middle-class parents who could not imagine how their own innocent children could survive so alone and unprotected in neighborhoods where they themselves would hardly dare to venture. Some historians have since suggested that Riis staged these photos by paying these children to lie still for the camera. The issue is not the literal truth – did small groups

of street urchins sleep together in hidden alleys in broad daylight – but the larger social truth that such images exposed. Families unable to feed their children or abusive parents who took out their rage over their own impotency on their offspring had created an army of children who had to fend for themselves on the streets. For Riis, these social evils all resulted from tenements, places that not only contained small, cramped apartments but sweatshops that exploited workers and made it impossible for them to get ahead financially.

Here, we can begin to explicitly link Riis's work to those aims of education that I outlined at the beginning of this address. Clearly, Riis embraced the notion of education as a vehicle for improving society. Yet rather than choosing between intellectual and experiential learning, he employed both by marrying images and words. Riis did not let the middle class view his photographs in silence as he opened up a window into the daily misery of tenement living. He made these images come alive by projecting stories and moral lessons onto these photographs. Riis expected these images to live for a long time in the minds of those who saw them, providing a visual slideshow that played whenever the middle class encountered the poor in real life. Instead of the poor remaining an "other" that could be safely ignored, Riis gave them a permanent place in the lives of the middle class by cementing these images in the middle-class imagination. In this way, Riis not only gave the middle-class a social responsibility to do something about poverty, he helped connect Americans to one another, creating bonds where none had existed before.

Yet what about self-interest? This aim of education was also present in Riis's work. Riis's images of five- and six-year-olds sleeping in the streets aroused sympathy about their plight. But Riis did not rely solely on empathy to propel the middle class into action. He also appealed to middle-class self-interest when he presented the social ills bred by the tenements.

These children would not remain innocent and adorable forever, he reminded the public. Let to their own devices as they grew, these boys would likely join one of the myriad street gangs that offered protection to homeless boys and gave them a livelihood by initiating them into a life of crime. The image of young teenage gang members joyfully demonstrating for Riis how they jumped upon an unsuspecting victim to rob him painted a disturbing picture of how crime would continue unabated unless the middle class addressed the root cause of the problem.

Fast forward a few years, and the teenage gang members would turn into the type of hardened criminals whose police mug shots revealed men who appeared capable of committing murder without the slightest feeling of remorse. Crime affected all city residents, and if the middle class did not feel compelled to improve the tenements for the benefit of the poor, then they should do it to protect their own families.

Other personal concerns besides crime should propel the well to do into action, Riis contended. Even the sweatshops where children toiled to produce clothing posed a risk to the middle class. "It has happened more than once that a child recovering from smallpox, and in the most contagious stage of the disease, has been found crawling among heaps of unfinished clothing that the next day would be offered for sale on the counter of a Broadway store," Riis noted, pointing out that

diseases bred in the poorer quarters of the city had ways of migrating into the better neighborhoods.

In the end, Riis succeeded in arousing public outrage and New York City began regulating the tenements. A 1901 tenement law required windows in the center of the tenement apartments so that air could circulate throughout an apartment. It also mandated the installation of indoor toilets to replace leaking outdoor privies. This reform stopped seeping sewage from contaminating the ground water that residents drank, helping to eliminate water-borne illnesses like cholera and typhoid. Perhaps more importantly, Riis demonstrated the power of education to reform society, to help individuals improve their personal lives, and to create a life of the mind that expanded the public's horizons beyond the lives they actually led.

This quick journey into the past hopefully has some lessons for us today – another often-cited reason for the educational value of studying the past. As I conclude my remarks, one lesson to draw from Riis seems particularly important – the power of education. You are intelligent and inquisitive people, and I am sure that many examples of how inspired action can initiate a movement or bring an issue to the public consciousness. Riis' story reminds us that images do not change history; people do. Riis used the power of images to influence his society, and others have built on his precedent throughout the 20th century. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. intentionally used imagery to gain sympathy and support for the civil rights movement, certain that once confronted with the sight of die-hard segregationists violently attacking nonviolent demonstrators the public would demand an end to segregation. On 2004, 24-year-old Sgt. Joseph Darby made a courageous decision to turn over hundreds of pictures depicting the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib to his superiors, prompting a society-wide debate over the mission in Iraq.

How will you use the power of education to change your life, the larger society in which you live and future generation to come? What will be your place in history? Chapman University looks forward to finding out.

About the Speaker

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.

Dr. Jennifer D. Keene is a professor of history and chair of the Department of History at Chapman University. She received her Ph.D. in history from Carnegie Mellon University and is a specialist in the American military experience during World War I. Prior to joining the faculty at Chapman University in 2004, Dr. Keene taught at the University of Redlands. Dr. Keene has published three books on the American involvement in the First World War: *Doughboys: The Great War and the Remaking of America* (2001), *The United States and the First World War* (2000), and *World War I* (2006). She is currently working on a book detailing the African American experience during the First World War. Dr. Keene served as an associate editor for the *Encyclopedia of War and American Society* (2005). She has received numerous fellowships for her research, including a Mellon Fellowship, a Graves Award, the Fulbright Senior Scholar Award to France, and Albert J. Beveridge Research Grant, and a National Research Council Postdoctoral Research Award. Dr.

Keene's articles have appeared in *The Organization of American Historians Magazine of History*, *Annales de Demographie Historique*, *Peace and Change*, *Intelligence and National Security*, and *Military Psychology*. She has published essays in several edited anthologies, including *Warfare and Belligerence: New Perspectives on the First World War*; *National Stereotypes in Perspective: Frenchmen in America, Americans in France*; and *Knowing Your Friends: Intelligence Inside Alliances and Coalitions from 1914 to the Cold War*. In addition, Dr. Keene has served as an on-camera expert for several film documentaries, including *The March of the Bonus Army*, which aired on PBS nationwide on Memorial Day 2006 and appeared on the Chicago public radio program *Odyssey*.