

**Aims of Education 2013:
Fanning the Flames**

By Richard Bausch, MFA

I want to tell you a little story first. Since I'm a storyteller, I will be very quick with it – but it's a true story, one that I love to tell my students. When I was in my early twenties – before I was old enough to order whiskey in the bars, so really only 20, I was playing guitar and singing in clubs, wherever I could. I was going to be a singer songwriter, And I was going to bypass college. I'd done a lot of wide, unsupervised reading, including everything by this guy "Frood"—even the case histories--and I had nothing but unaffected scorn, to paraphrase Scott Fitzgerald, about people who went to college. College! What a waste of time!

And so I was playing at a fraternity house at the University of Illinois, and during the break, I was standing in the kitchen, with this very tall young man, a student at the university.

I said, "So what are you studying at this...college?"

He answered, "Psychology."

And I said "Oh yeah – well, have you read Frood?"

He said, "Who?"

And I, being me, turned and got everyone's attention at this party: "Hey, everybody, here's a guy studying psychology at the University of Illinois—never read Frood!"

And he said, "Do you mean *Freud*?"

I paused a second, and then came out with perhaps the single dumbest thing I have probably ever said: "Him, too."

I have since found out the meaning of college.

Here's Benjamin Franklin talking about education in a very specific way, concerning relations with the Indians of the time in which he lived. He first describes their customs and what they value, and talks about how they generally study oratory. Their best speaker is the one who has the most influence. He says that they have no officers to compel obedience, but everybody cooperates. And then he speaks of an offer that was made in the treaty of Lancaster, Pennsylvania around 1744, between the government of Virginia and the Six Nations. Now these are Franklin's words: "After the principle business was settled, the commissioners of Virginia acquainted the Indians by a speech, that there was at Williamsburg a College, with a fund for educating Indian youth; and that if the Six Nations would send down half a dozen of their young lads to that college, the government would take care that they should be well provided for, and instructed in all the learning of the white people.

"It is one of the Indian rules of politeness not to answer a public proposition the same day that it is made; they think it would be treating it as a light matter, and that

they show disrespect if they answer right away. Respect is shown by taking the time to consider it. They therefore deferred their answer till the day following; when their speaker began by expressing their deep sense of the kindness of the Virginia government in making them that offer. And they said, ‘We want to thank you heartily. But you who are wise must know that different nations have different conceptions of things, and you will therefore not take it amiss if our ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the same with yours. We have had some experience of it: several of our young people were formerly brought up at the College of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your sciences; but when they came back to us they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer or kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, or counselors – they were totally good for nothing. We are however not the less obliged by your kind offer, though we decline accepting it; and to show our grateful sense of it, if the gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons, we will take great care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and make men out of them.’”

So. Here we are in the year 2013 in our own tribe, with our own values and our own hopes for advancement and happiness, and our own expectations for ourselves and our young ones. And the “Aims of Education,” as we perceive them, are of course reflections of this time and place. They have everything to do with the values we hold to be important where we live.

Of course, we want to find something to do in life: work that provides a good income and that engages us and interests us; something that when you are engaged in it, you lose time. As the saying goes, if you like your work, you never need a

vacation. But there is something beyond all that. Education is, finally, not only about producing more workers, and this is not a beehive. I doubt that anyone would deny that democracy as a form of government relies upon an informed population to maintain itself. And in this age of inflammatory political rhetoric it has become rather easy to forget that one cannot have a truly informed population without a strong and generally realized ability to distinguish the nuances and subtleties of language. All education begins with language, with the first speech patterns and habits of thought while growing up. And growing up, most of us are taught religion, the responsibilities of good citizenship, the love of country, consideration and manners, respect and honesty, loyalty and love of family, and the value of hard work.

There are other things our parents communicate to us, such as the love of good music and an appreciation for excellence. I knew what Hank Aaron was hitting before the National League did because my father appreciated his achievement so much. Our earliest education includes these good things – but there is a darker side of the matter, too, as we know.

We know that certain prejudices exist in our lives, certain unfortunate and sorrowful assumptions about the world that get passed from generation to generation like a virus whose ill effects no one sees until they are upon us. And I believe that the “Aims of Education” must include the liberation of our hearts and minds from those things that retard our growth, as members not only of our own small tribe but of the whole human family.

When I graduated from college, my younger sister said to me, “So, you’ve read all these books and you have a degree in English—does this mean you don’t believe

in God any more?” I looked at her for a moment, unable to believe that this very sharp and wickedly funny young woman was not making a joke. But she was serious—this is, after all, a country with a long and rather steadily consistent distrust of intellectuals and of intellectual life. Even our writers have fallen prey to the sound of such distrust. Remember Ernest Hemingway parading around as the big game hunter, Faulkner claiming he was a simple farmer, my old friend Larry Brown playing the plain firefighter.

This anti-intellectual stance is a strange paradox given the fact that the founders of the country were all, to a man (and to a woman, too—take a look at Abigail Adams’ letters to her husband)—intellectuals. All of them. Similarly, we have the paradoxical fact that one of the prized aspects of present political life is to proudly announce an intolerance of compromise. The statement is always made that “One does not compromise,” as if this kind of recalcitrance were always a virtue, when in fact one of the reasons for our beloved country’s rise and its success has always been its particular *genius* for compromise. (The one grievous failure of that great gift being the Civil War...)

Anyway, my sister asked the question and I said, “I believe in God.” She stared at me a moment, then said, “What’s different, then?” And I didn’t know how to answer the question. I suppose I still don’t know exactly how I should have answered without sounding idiotically vain – but I could have said, quite simply and truthfully, “Well, there is *more* of me now, and I’m free.” And I would not have meant it vainly, because the real aim of education is liberation, and no less. It involves the release of talent and the enlargement of one’s very being.

And, of course, a real education is not something one “completes” here or anywhere. Real education is something you take up, not as a means to make a living, but as a *habit of being* through a lifetime. I teach literature and fiction writing, and it’s easy to fall into the trap of believing that my students will only go as far as I take them, that they will read the books or stories I have assigned and nothing more. The truth of it is that if I’ve been as faithful to the work as I have hoped to be, I will have lighted the fire in them that will take them far past the confines of a single semester in a university – even a brilliant university in California in a young century. This is not where education “happens;” it is where it *begins*.

Right now, in colleges across the country, committed and serious educators are using the phrase “learning outcome.” I must say quite honestly that I find the phrase rather inept and reductive, because it is really far from describing what I’m after. If a student leaves my class and doesn’t know what a metaphor is, but he leaves with his mind firmly made up to go get more of what he was exposed to in that class, then my job is done. My “learning outcome” is to light a fire under my students. It’s not about the transfer of information; it’s about the ignition of something that will carry them far from my classroom. And if they are already burning with it, as many of them are when they come to me, I am concerned primarily with fanning the flames.

For me, there is nothing that could be so important because it is that kind of education that allows you to live more fully. It gives you life you never might have experienced otherwise. It provides you not only with deeper pleasures and with a stronger sense of your own being in the world, but it can literally make you

more free—because a person on that sort of journey is less likely to be fooled by rhetoric or slogans or political cant.

That person has begun to teach himself or herself how language is put together from the inside out. And in that sense knowledge is, indeed, power—but in that sense knowledge is also compassion and grace and the ability to empathize, to be that person on whom nothing is lost—the person whose best gift, when all else is settled, is the gift of appreciating the beauties that are available to anyone who has the eyes to see and has had the good fortune to be able to learn how.

I would like to leave you with words of a country song I wrote early this morning while lying in bed. The melody you will recognize, and it's purely for fun.

(Sings)

“Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be writers.
Don't let them pick guitars and read them old books
Make'em be Congressmen, con-men and crooks!
Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be writers.
They'll always stay home
In their room all alone,
No matter how bad it looks.

Writers ain't easy to love and they're harder to hold,
And they'd rather write poems and listen to stories get told:
Old worn-out folk song lines
And jokes in the nighttime
And talking about starting once more.
And if you don't let him sit there and scribble and whine,
He'll probably just close the door.”

Repeat chorus twice. Thank you.

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ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Richard Bausch is professor of creative writing in the Department of English at Chapman University. He is an acknowledged master of the short story form whose work has appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Esquire*, *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *Narrative*, *Gentleman's Quarterly*, *Playboy*, *The Southern Review*, *New Stories From the South*, *The Best American Short Stories*, *O. Henry Prize Stories*, and *The Pushcart Prize Stories*, among others. His stories have been widely anthologized in many collections, including *The Granta Book of the American Short Story* and *The Vintage Book of the Contemporary American Short Story*.

Bausch is the author of twelve novels and eight collections of stories, including his most recent novel, *Before, During, After*, as well as *Rebel Powers*, *Violence*, *Good Evening Mr. & Mrs. America & All The Ships At Sea*, *In The Night Season*, *Hello To The Cannibals*, *Thanksgiving Night*, *Peace*, and *Something is Out There*; and the story collections *Spirits*, *The Fireman's Wife*, *Rare & Endangered Species*, *Someone To Watch Over Me*, *The Stories of Richard Bausch*. His novel *The Last Good Time* was made into a feature-length film.

He has won two National Magazine Awards, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Lila-Wallace Reader's Digest Fund Writer's Award, the Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, The 2004 PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story, The Dayton Literary Peace Prize for his novel PEACE, and most recently the 2013 John William Corrington Award for Literary Excellence and the prestigious 2013 REA Award for his "influence on the Short Story as a form."

He has been a member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers since 1996. In 1999 he signed on as co-editor, with RV Cassill, of *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*; since Cassill's passing in 2002, Bausch is the sole editor of that important anthology.