“An Interpretation of Global Citizenship Education”

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Education ministers and their offices are in an unenviable position. You are being pushed and pulled in so many directions at the same time. Changes in politics; changes in discourse about education; changes in the national/global economy that require shifting priorities -- all of these and more are putting enormous pressure on you. I had just a small glimpse of your challenges when I served on my local school board for three years, and came to appreciate the competing demands that come across one’s desk even from a relatively small population of students. I cannot imagine being responsible for millions.

While I’m very sympathetic, I nevertheless must implore you to act. The situation in which we find ourselves globally—living interconnected yet behaving as though we do not --- requires your full attention and action. Buckminster Fuller, a visionary of the early global era, upon hearing the news of the bombing of Hiroshima in August, 1945 wrote in his diary: “Humanity is now in ‘final exam’ as to whether or not it qualifies for continuance.” Seventy years later, that final exam looms much larger.

We are at a moment in time where we face the paradoxical capacity to destroy much of what the modern era has achieved. But we also have the chance -- one that may not come again -- to pivot towards a more just, sustainable and tolerant global society. I say pivot intentionally here since a subtle change of course will not be sufficient. We need dramatic changes in education and we need them now.

The challenges are myriad: climate warming and environmental degradation, regional insecurity and severe intolerance, grave injustices and an ever-widening North/South gap, these are just the beginning of what quickly becomes an overwhelming litany of world problems. My aim is not to overwhelm you with information that you already know. Rather I want to suggest ways that you can encourage educators in your ranks to join this vital cause by thinking about the problem differently – about what it means to educate for global citizenship.

A child born in Seoul today will still be here into the 22nd Century, alive and well in the year 2115. As difficult as it is to imagine this, we would be wise to begin to think of the quality of that child’s life over the duration of the next century. Will she know peace or war? Will she experience the joys of living in diverse communities with others or the anxiety of living in isolated fear of others? Will she know the aesthetic and material blessings the biosphere provides or experience only suffering and environmental deterioration? These are the right questions to be asking for this child born today in Seoul. Thinking about the world temporally, we are reminded of the lovely Kenyan
adage: “This land was not given to you by your parents, it is on loan to you from your children.”

My first suggestion for global citizenship education is that we begin to think of ourselves, our earth and each other, in a temporal way, or in light of time. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of learning to think globally since people are notoriously bad at understanding time. I’m reminded of this when I look in the mirror each day and fully expect to see that 25-year-old version of myself looking back. When he’s not there I use this humbling moment to recall how incapable of grasping the slippage of time we are even when we are aware of this incapacity. On a broader scale, can anyone fully grasp that the Millenium Development Goals are already at the end of the first time marker, 2015? It seems like just a few weeks back that I was reading them on their release. As we are engaged in global goal-setting and beyond, let us work at understanding the temporality of our lives.

Speaking of humility, I want to suggest that this too is a crucial element of global citizenship education. This may seem odd given that we usually feel proud when we know more things or feel satisfaction at possessing knowledge about the world. In fact, global citizenship education is less about knowing more and more about all that we do not know—about each other and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. That is not to suggest we should revel in our ignorance but rather recognize our limits and be open to all that can be learned from myriad points of experience beyond those limits. In the Jewish tradition, a yarmuke or kippah is, among other things, a tangible reminder of the limits of people’s knowledge and heart before God. It seems that this simple reminder is one that could benefit all of us as we encourage and invite people to comprehend, or know, the world and to act in solidarity within it.

Lastly, global citizenship education ought to be simultaneously everyday and transformative, at once mundane and transcendent. What does that mean? How does one ponder the meaning of the universe and one’s miniscule place within it while eating a sandwich? I want to suggest that both activities—pondering and eating—are fundamentally wound within what it means to be a global citizen. Thinking big about ourselves and our lives is perhaps the same insight that inspired Diogenes to utter his famous phrase, “I am a citizen of the world” over two millennia ago. And our daily eating habits are so intimately woven into the fabric of a networked planet in a beleaguered biosphere that one is literally eating from around the world at every meal. As Martin Luther King reminds us, “All life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly…before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you've depended on more than half of the world.”

How might one begin to educate for global citizenship in their ministry? I have a few starting points to suggest:
Develop curriculum to illustrate how interdependent the world is by having students trace where their clothing and personal items come from, how they got into their hands and how they will be disposed of;

Create opportunities for educators and students to learn about how other people live, those living 5, 500 and 5000 kilometers away, through exchange programs and online dialogs about common interests and shared problems;

Build gardens and grow food while studying how food, water and power is sourced, generated and supplied to their school and community;

Support educators learning about the world through a Professional Development opportunity, such as the online Global Competence Certificate Program offered by Teachers College, Columbia University or take an online course on sustainability with Jeffrey Sachs of the Earth Institute of Columbia University.

Take advantage of the power of this group of ministers to collaborate across ministries and share, exchange and network your teachers to build a better tomorrow through common projects.

Whatever path you choose, the work is complicated and demanding, and yet so necessary--to live in a way that recognizes the immediacy and interdependence of every interaction, while accepting how our connectedness winds us into events much larger than ourselves.

In each of my examples, I highlight simple, everyday tasks—wearing a hat, glancing in a mirror or eating a sandwich---that symbolize much more profound matters. This is an enormous task but it is what we must do -- to educate the child born today in Seoul and every other city, in a manner that imagines a world that is not yet—one of peace, respect, justice and sustainability—in a way that perceives time with a sense of urgency, hears others with openness and humility and moves to inhabit our daily practices with a profound sense of life.

Thank you.