

The Concept of Ubuntu as an Educational Philosophy that
Imagines the Possibilities of All Learners.

Cornell Thomas

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It is indeed an honor, one well beyond my imagined possibilities, to stand here before you giving the 2015 Drake Lecture, in my home town of St. Louis, Missouri. While growing up in this city, you only saw people of my color in this hotel serving others. One could only imagine a day when.....

I reviewed some of the most recent presentations of this lecture in an attempt to determine my approach to today. Well, after my review of so many great lectures, I decided to heed the words of my good friend Mike Sacken, "Just don't embarrass the family." So, I will attempt to heed his words while hopefully providing some good food for thought.

Let Us Begin the Work

Ubuntu: the belief that people are empowered by other people, that we become our best selves, and organization, through unselfish interaction with others.

Setting the Stage

I grew up in a home that seemed to have people in it all of the time. I am the seventh of seven children; some of my siblings had children before I was born; and many of my nieces around my age had children while very young. My family is large. My parents welcomed our family members to the *Big House* (an apartment until I was 14) all of the time. They also welcomed their friends, neighbors, people in need of a meal, bath and/or a good nights' sleep. My parents often asked us, them/us, what we were going to do about our issues and concerns.

Instead of trying to give answers or just a hand out, my parents would explore options with us as a way to provide a hand up. Their focus was on empowering instead of enabling individuals to succeed.

My mom would talk about how I would just disappear at times due to the number of people who were always at the Big House. At first she might have found me in the basement reading a book. Later I would find myself at the museum, primarily in the area full of African artifacts. Internally I had to escape the crowds. I often felt like a sardine in a can designed for half of the bodies filling the rooms of our home. My parents didn't have much money, but they shared all that they had, and did it with so much love. We lived in a very violent neighborhood, but no one ever did anything negative to my parents or our home. All knew that our home was off limits when it came to negative acts. Even two young men who eventually were sentenced to life in prison would protect my parents with their own lives.

While I often escaped the crowds, I grew to really appreciate how my parents embraced everyone. I learned, even before totally realizing it, the value of seeing the possibilities in individuals. I learned to be aware of danger, but to also seek the *why* behind the actions. My parents taught me to work hard to avoid making quick judgmental decisions of other people, simply through my personal lens. My parents also demonstrated the value of broadening one's lens each day. My mom believed that we all become better people by getting to know others well beyond the stereotypes we are bombarded with each day. My parent's' home became a community of people from so many walks of life, yet all were seen as individuals of promise. My parents taught us to live in the why and in the possibilities for all of us, and to love the journey. They taught us to embrace and internalize the South African Philosophy of Ubuntu—

human beings empowering other human beings through the collective responsibility of kindness and sharing. Ubuntu speaks the moral responsibility of leaders to recognize that others matter.

Matting

Most, perhaps all, of us want to believe that our lives matter in this great nation. We also want to be part of a nation that values, respects, and includes our thoughts and opinions in the decision making process. Most of us want to feel as though there are opportunities to effect positive change in our great nation, and especially in our sphere of influence. We want to be able to have voice in the decision making process and be afforded opportunities to work towards desired life goals. In other words, we want equal access to quality education, housing, governance, leadership, safety, career options, technology, and etc. To be sure, most of us desire to be par of a society that values our presence and actively seeks to include us in the daily and long-term activities that support and direct our lives and our country. To be included as valuable **(and valued)** members of this nation is something most of us desire. Most, perhaps all, of us want to help create an even better nation and future for our children. I would suggest that most, perhaps all, of us want to believe in the *American Dream*. Adams described the American Dream for us:

“... that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us over selves have grown weary and un-trustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances or position.” (Adams, J. T., 1931, pp. 214-215)

Is the American Dream really attainable by all Americans? What is our responsibility as Americans to try to make this so? Or, is there a belief, by most if not all Americans, that we live

in a nation where some pathways are cleared for passage, while others remain full of pot-holes, detours, and other impediments? Are some afforded the opportunity to spin a wheel full of fortune, while others must spin one full of misfortune?

Why – and then – How

I choose to live in what I call the world of “why...and then how.” This journey into the various discussion of why, and then how, finds its foundation, for me, within the questions regarding the social, political, economic, and educational challenges we face today. For example:

- Why should we make sure that more learners have access to a quality education?
- Why should we work to be sure all can afford health care?
- Why should we work to create more jobs?
- Why should we work in support of the Dream Act?
- Why should we support same sex marriage?
- Why do we continue suffer from un-American acts?

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Answers to the questions posed above must support this preamble to the Constitution for the United States of America. Therefore we move away from high stakes mandated testing practices and move towards more engaging teaching and learning environments focused on connecting (bridging) the existing knowledge of each learner with the information we know that they need to succeed in life and as successful citizens of this great nation. We must move away from the economic greed that continues to weaken the ethos of this great nation and move towards the rebuilding of our country through the creation of jobs leading to careers, which will

result in more individuals with excellent health care, especially with the enactment and continued support of the Affordable Care Act. *Liberty and justice for all* means just that, for all of us.

Included in this premise of liberty must be the right to marry the person of your choice. All other actions that negatively impact these and similar questions are un-American.

I call this emphasis on the social, political, economic, and educational challenges before us as an Educational Philosophy that ***Imagines the Possibilities*** of each learner. Imagining the Possibilities is embedded in an educational philosophy that is considered by some to be counter to other movements that have been diluted in our attempts to make sense of teaching and learning by understanding and classifying learners based on, for example, test scores, gender, culture, race, and/or socioeconomic status. It can be said that this philosophy of Imagining the Possibilities of each learner embraces the premise of Ubuntu: the belief that individuals are empowered by other individuals, that we become our best selves and our best nation, through unselfish interactions with others. Taken further, my success requires me to help empower others towards achieving their dreams in life. I am reminded of Luke 12:48: *“to whom much is given, much will be required.”* In other words, our gifts of talent, wealth, knowledge, etc., should be utilized to glorify God and to benefit others. ***Our egos are stroked when we see others also succeed.***

This premise of Ubuntu can also inform our successful attempts in teaching and learning environments. To teach using Ubuntu as a strong element of your foundation and with Imagining the Possibilities of each learner as your primary point of focus means to understand that every individual has the ability to learn. The work focuses on making the kinds of connections needed to help empower each learner to take personal ownership of their learning,

with the belief that learning is indeed possible. Larry Crabb reminds us that, "Connecting is the center of everything, and a vision for what we could become gives it power." (1997, p. 52). He goes on to remind us that connections result in wisdom – the wisdom to understand right from wrong, and deeper levels of critical thinking. Parker Palmer, in his book *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, talks about how dysfunctional our government and people have become. It is this high level of dysfunction that is causing even more division, splintering the very core of our strength - unity. Parker goes on to say:

How shall we respond to these cultural trends that diminish all of us? On this question, I, too, have a nonnegotiable conviction: violence can never be the answer. Instead, we must protect people's freedom to believe and behave as they will, within the rule of law; assent to majority rule while dedicating ourselves to protecting minority rights; embrace and act on our responsibility to care for one another; seek to educate ourselves about our critical differences; come together in dialogue toward mutual understand; and speak without fear against all that diminishes us, including the use of violence. (Palmer 2011, p.4)

Palmer goes on to suggest a set of foundational pillars designed to support and empower our society away from the splintering that is currently occurring. Paalmer's notion of healing moves us towards a more inclusive, engaged, and highly successful democracy focused on bringing us closer to common ground. He also tells us:

If American democracy fails, the ultimate cause will not be a foreign invasion or the power of big money or the greed and dishonesty of some elected officials or a military coup or the internal communist/socialist/fascist takeover that keeps some Americans awake at night. It will happen because we – you and I – became so fearful of each other, of our differences and of the future, that we unraveled the civic community on which democracy depends, losing power to resist all that threatens it and call it back to its highest forms. (Palmer 2011, p.8)

The five premises that Parker Palmer presents and expands on are: togetherness, appreciation of others, holding tensions in life-giving ways, personal voice and agency, and the capacity to foster community.

1. We must understand that we are all in this together.

The premise can be directed to a multitude of challenges we currently face as a nation. For example, the recent video-deaths of black and brown men and women by police officers provide one of our most serious challenges. Will the call for more police *training* resolve much of the challenges? It is suggested here that we need more. We need reflective and engaging conversations and experiences that touch the heart on all sides of the challenges. It is the only real way to eradicate the stereotypes about the *other* that continues to divide us and provide the rationale to kill another human being. It seems that more of a Socratic process, with much dialogue among participants, is needed as individuals are empowered to say no to stereotypes, and yes...that we are all individuals with gifts that can become critically important components to the success of the whole, all of us, all citizens of this great nation.

2. We must develop an appreciation of the value of “otherness.”

Yes, we are all unique individuals. The key word here is *individuals*. While we identify ourselves often using group identifiers, our affiliations with these groups vary from person to person. And these variations often change as new experiences impact our thinking, beliefs, and actions. We are ultimately unique, interesting, valuable, and evolving individuals. For example, I am labeled by our society as an African-American or Black male. The generalized stereotypes of being a Black male in this county provide more negative than positive images, at least initially. Some would argue that these negative images of the Black male seem to be much more

persistent and pervasive in rural, more isolated, lower socio-economic communities. I would suggest that the actions of those who do live in large cities with very little isolation, and from more affluent socio-economic communities think in similar ways, but are just a little more politically correct, when needed. Just take a moment to review the results of their actions, the perpetuation of these negative images. However, this social construction of my identity follows a very narrow and destructive pathway, if I buy into the hype. You see, I am also a husband, father, grandfather, sibling, golfer, scholar, and, most important for me, a child of God. It is this last descriptor that helps to frame a mind-set for our future attempts to build a better community and nation. While we are different, most if not all of us seek joy, the opportunity to pursue our dreams, peace, limited stress, and a better future for our next generations. Can we then begin our relationships with these thoughts in the fore instead of the negative stereotypes that seem to create the kind of perceptual barriers that cause us to vilify *otherness* rather than embrace one another? Now is the time to start anew.

3. We must cultivate the ability to hold tension in life-giving ways.

The demonstrators raise signs that say, “Black Lives Matter.” While some say yes, others among us say, what?...and still others say, “All Lives Matter.” The thoughts and opinions of most, if not all, of us fall somewhere along a continuum of thought between these responses. The task for us is to find ways to have the kind of meaningful discussions that lead to more informed understanding of each of our opinions and of each other. The development of broader understandings as discussed here helps all of us to focus on a better way forward, for all involved. Of even greater importance is a continual set of actions leading to a community that

utilizes inevitable tensions among us as part of a process leading to more unified and inclusive efforts to clear pathways as we all strive to live the American Dream.

4. We must generate a sense of personal voice and agency.

Building on what I just said regarding holding tension in life-giving ways, a major key towards building the community we seek is the inclusion of all voices as a way to make more informed and successful decisions. If I say that I have a torn ligament in my knee yet you believe that I only have a slight strain, the differences in prognosis will lead to remedies that could prove disastrous. One can use this example to bring clarity to the recent shootings and other physical violence leading to death such as in Staten Island, as partially caught on video, of Black males by police officers. For example, some Black males may talk about the almost daily interactions with police being treated as the enemy, the scourge of society, as less than a man. Such negative interpretations often never end in positive outcomes, especially in the heat of the moment. While the same police officers might express the belief that Black males are lazy, drug smoking, jobless, boys who are always up to no good, thugs carrying concealed weapons, and individuals that need to be monitored aggressively in order to maintain some semblance of peace and safety in certain neighborhood. Such negative interpretations often never end in positive outcomes, especially in the heat of the moment. Educational opportunities, not just *training*, that encourage and support opportunities to come to the table to discuss and work through these kinds of negative and poorly informed beliefs will lead to improved connections and relations between these men and the police. The same process will also lead to a much-improved America.

5. We must strengthen our capacity to create community.

They must become *Us*. A stronger community and nation becomes more possible when

We no longer set aside others as *Those People*. We must better understand that each of us has a complex individual identity that continues to evolve. Experiences, especially with those outside of given comfort zones, can help us eradicate the generalizations about the *other* that often dominate our thinking. Many of us are flooded with negative stereotypes of the *other* through the media, school and home, most of our lives. We must strive hard to counter these images with ones that are more representative of the individuals who make up this great nation. *They* become *Us* and the invisibility that currently blinds our vision will disappear. This work will indeed lead us towards real community. A community where all believe that their lives matter, and what we seek is indeed attainable. This is my prayer.

Schools and Testing

Diane Ravitch tells us that:

Children in the early elementary grades need teachers who set age-appropriate goals. They should learn to read, write, calculate, and explore nature, and they should have plenty of time to sing and dance and draw and play and giggle. Classes in these grades should be small enough – ideally fewer than twenty – so that students get the individual attention they need. Testing in the early grades should be used sparingly, not to rank students, but diagnostically, to help determine what they know and what they still need to learn. Test scores should remain a private matter between parents and teachers, not shared with the district or the state for any individual student. The district or state may aggregate scores for entire schools but should not judge teachers or schools on the basis of these scores. (Ravitch, 2013, p 23)

Numerous reports over the last three decades have expressed concerns about our educational systems. These reports, initially gaining the public's ear with "A Nation at Risk" in 1984, attempt to provide data showing the great declines in academic achievement among students attending school in this great nation. The response to these reports have been numerous, but none more damaging than the implementation of mandated testing procedures. This damage was increased when teacher salaries, and even their very careers, became dependent upon the test

score results of students in their class. While teachers, if given some level of autonomy, can control the process, they have very limited control over the actual product. However, school districts have addressed the call for mandated testing and higher scores by restricting teacher autonomy!

There is nothing wrong with testing, especially when results are utilized as a diagnostic tool to adjust teaching practices. However, the interpretation of mandated high stakes testing has resulted in more rote learning and less development of the mind; more lecture as a teaching practice and fewer engaging and often student lead discussions as a way to explore new concepts and theories; and teaching as a task instead of an exploration into the unknown with the excited anticipation of new discoveries, and thus higher levels of academic success. Most public school systems across this country must adhere to this high-stakes testing calamity or face the loss of much needed federal funds. Yet while proponents of high stakes testing claim success, traditional high achieving private schools continue to ignore any adoption of these high stakes testing procedures for their schools. One wonders why? We know why.

Not being allowed to find a better balance between preparing students to maximize their efforts on assessment tools and helping to empower them to think more deeply and take on learning as a personal priority has caused many excellent teachers to leave our most challenging schools. We must better understand that in our most challenging schools the transition from home to these types of classroom environments can often be very traumatic. The day-to-day structure of the classroom is often very different than life at home. Relationships between the learner and teacher are often very shallow and the true identity of each child becomes invisible with the use of descriptors such as at-risk, poor, second language learner, or 504-student. Instead,

teachers need to spend time getting to know their students in order to better connect life at home with their time in school.

While most, **if** not all, teachers have command of their subject matter, many lack the opportunities in today's high-stakes testing environment to apply the *art* of teaching in their classroom. The *art* of teaching referenced here focuses on the ability of teachers to utilize a variety of creative approaches to teaching and learning as a way to connect with each individual learner. The *art* of teaching encompasses the ability to build connections between the knowledge students already have with the information we want them to learn.

What can we do to maximize teaching and learning in this environment of mandated high- stakes testing? How do we best accomplish the mission before us to prepare our learners to reach higher levels of academic acumen? Where do we go for much needed strength as we seek a way out of what seems no way?

Answers are found in our hearts and in our very souls. God has *called* us to teach. He will provide a pathway for success. Our task is to follow this pathway and to avoid the dangerous detours that try to convince us to go another way.

It is suggested here that these same foundational pillars, and this premise of Ubuntu can be utilized to form and empower educators towards an educational philosophy resulting in more inclusive, engaged and highly successful teaching and learning communities. Ubuntu will provide the focus needed to continually promote the premise that all of us can and do learn. Given the importance of how our environment impacts teaching and learning, it is imperative that a focus on community, inclusion, and Ubuntu become the driving force – the philosophical premise – behind our thinking, decisions, and actions.

Many of our neighborhood experiences fill the lives of learners with ways of life that counter most efforts that promote quality teaching and learning. Media outlets also create images of life that diminish the importance of teaching and learning. When we realize that a primary difference between successful and unsuccessful learners revolve around the inputs in their lives, it becomes more and more obvious that part of our work as educators is to counter those experiences. For example, my mom worked most of her adult life as a domestic. She would often bring home old *Look* and *Life* magazines for us to read. These magazines were full of beautiful homes, awesome vacation sites, and great adventures. My mom would tell me that there were people who actually lived their lives in this way. She also said that a good education would open doors for me to have similar life experiences. My father was a self-taught reader. He would read the newspaper, while I read my books. While talking with him about what I read, he would also ask why I thought the way that I did. He would also ask me to explain my opinions and answers to his questions. Our arguments about our favorite baseball and football teams and players became epic. Most importantly, he invited me into the dialogue of *why and then how*; and now I continue to live in the world of *WHY...and HOW*.

Teaching and Learning

The utilization of Palmer's five *habits of the heart* can also empower all involved towards the building, sustaining, and growing communities where teaching and learning flourishes— means to foster compassion and generosity toward others (Ubuntu). These five pillars can be turned into *WE WILL* statements and can become a driving force behind turning unsuccessful school inside out.

1. We will always work together to determine next steps with a focus on the academic and social growth of all learners.
2. We will value all of the voices/gifts of all learners and connect these gifts with new information as a way for knowledge to be internalized and expanded.
3. We will better utilize the tensions within our teaching and learning environments in positive ways to diminish division, welcome community, and grow intellectually.
4. We will help to empower all learners with the purpose of utilizing their experiences as a bridge to new knowledge and understand that all of us are learners.
5. We will focus on *Us* and *We* as our starting point for the work ahead.

Ubuntu, as described here, provides the underpinnings of the kind of philosophical foundation needed to continually promote the premise that all of us can and do learn. Those of us that choose to embark on this journey will work to enrich teaching and learning environments with highly engaged and interactive communities where technology is utilized to bring the world to the classroom. Students who lack the financial resources to explore the world will be able to do so, right in their classrooms. Of even greater value will be the conversations that emerge between the students and others from across the world, in small classroom groups, with their teachers, and at home with family members.

A primary goal within these teaching and learning environments will be the development of deeper levels of thinking about those things that promote the kind of learning needed for academic success and lives full of great promise. It is suggested here that most, if not all, students can think critically. Those that know how to disrupt your classrooms consistently; those who develop drug selling organizations; and those who learn to hack your computer must use levels of critical thinking to get their work done. Our task is to connect their abilities to think

with the kinds of thinking and doing that will promote their opportunities for both academic and social success.

We understand that our nation is only as strong as our weakest links. Those suffering from a system of education that fails represent some of the weakest links in our great nation. Ubuntu brings focus to the work ahead and causes actions leading to a much stronger and successful citizenry. Let us continue to support this philosophy of teaching and learning.

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