

## **READING, LITERATURE, AND SPIRITUALITY: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF EDUCATION**

The Academic Convocation Address (September 7, 2010)

**Naomi A. Schoenfeld, Ph.D.\***  
**Assistant Professor, Division of Education, Rivier College**



**T**his summer, you were asked to read “*Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace...One School at a Time*” by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin (Mortenson & Relin, 2007). I’d like to begin by reading the opening of a very different story, written long ago:

“He had seen everything, had experienced all emotions, from exaltation to despair, had been granted a vision into the great mystery, the secret places, the primeval days before the Flood. He had journeyed to the edge of the world and made his way back, exhausted, but whole. He had carved his trials on stone tablets, had restored the holy Eanna Temple and the massive wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal. See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun. Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than the mind can imagine... Walk on the wall of Uruk. Follow its course around the city... Observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares. Find the cornerstone and under it a copper box that is marked with his name. Unlock it. Open the lid. Take out the tablets of lapis lazuli. Read how Gilgamesh suffered all and accomplished all.” (Mitchell, 2006, p. 11)

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the earliest works of literature known to man (Dalley, 1989; Gaster, 1952; Mitchell, 2006). It is the story of a powerful king – Gilgamesh – whose only friend has died, and how, overcome with grief, this king leaves his country and sets out on a quest to find immortality and defeat death itself. The story’s inspiration, Gilgamesh, was a real ruler in Uruk – known today as Iraq – more than six thousand of years ago. The original story was told and retold, evolving as it went, until three thousand years ago a young Mesopotamian priest named Sin-liqe-unninni wrote his

version – the beginning of which you just heard – on clay tablets that would become buried in the ruins of nearby Nineveh, and discovered by archeologists in 1849 (Mitchell, 2006).

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* survived because Sin-liqe-unninni *wrote it down*. Because of the written word, we can sit side by side with audiences of a vanished civilization. We can share with people who lived when woolly mammoths roamed the earth, the timeless human experiences of grief at the loss of a loved one, of feelings of anger at its unfairness, and of ultimately coming to peace with that which we cannot change.

This is the power of written language. When one learns to read, the first and most profound effect is that one becomes suddenly a part of the global conversation – able to tell one’s own story, and to learn from the stories of others whom we will never meet. These stories provide windows into the worlds that would otherwise vanish with the deaths of their authors – the diary of Anne Frank (Frank, 1992), showing Nazi Germany through the eyes of a young Jewish girl – or Helen Keller’s autobiography (Keller, 2003), which, by showing for the first time what it was like to be deaf and blind in a world of sight and sound, dispelled permanently the myth that the deaf-blind are intellectually disabled.

But the *Epic of Gilgamesh* holds another important lesson. With its roots in that region’s past, it reminds us that the nations of South Asia and the Middle East were, and are, centers of culture and learning, with a history of literature and scientific discovery next to which we Americans, who count our sense of ‘long ago’ in hundreds, not thousands, of years, pale in comparison; and that this history – these traditions, and stories – are the birthright of their modern-day citizens.

In “*Three Cups of Tea*”, Greg Mortenson (2007) travels the lands of Gilgamesh on an epic quest of his own – to bring schools to an area where civil unrest and inept government had destroyed any opportunity for formal education. He experiences a land that is in the middle of *a dark time* – a time of poverty and violence, when typical citizens live with the daily uncertainty of not knowing what those with power, and guns, may decide to do to them next.

All nations have their dark times. Our own country has had its fair share. We have been part of the destruction of Native American life and people, of slavery, of widespread child labor, and of the forced internment of Japanese Americans during WWII. Today we face a more subtle darkness surrounding who we will let live in this country, and how we will treat those we do not. Less than a year ago, a young Mexican-American woman, a legal resident of the United States, was imprisoned in California pending an immigration review. Denied medical treatment for diabetes, she died chained to her bunk several weeks into her detention. In Florida, an 81 year old Haitian pastor with a valid American visa was similarly detained, and his blood pressure medication taken away (Adams, 2004). When symptoms set in, officials accused this elderly man of ‘faking it’, and he died alone, shackled to a bed, with his family barred from visiting. These are only two examples of cases that are occurring in the hundreds around the nation (Adams, 2004; Bernstein, 2010) – victims, I would say, to our prejudice, and to an outdated struggle for a national identity based on ethnicity. But whether you agree with that or not, one thing is clear – when it comes to the ways we treat others, we do not hold the high moral ground.

The people of Pakistan have good reason to want schools for their children. Depriving certain groups of education – as the governments of that region have done – has long been a way to consolidate power, and to restrict privilege to a select few. For would-be dictators, the steps are simple:

1. Make education a requirement for something important – say, voting, or holding a government position.
2. Make it impossible for those you dislike to get that education – or, if you prefer, provide them with an “education” of very poor quality, and then blame the students for not knowing more.

Exploiting education in this way is simple, adaptable, and easily enforced with a combination of laws, intimidation, and uneven distribution of resources. It can be applied to whomever you happen to dislike – an ethnic group, individuals with disabilities, people of a certain faith, women. In this country, it was used to prohibit the education of slaves, and then once slavery had ended, to restrict voting to those who could read and write – a requirement that was doubly unfair, since those it excluded, former slaves, were only illiterate because they had been forbidden to learn in the first place.

Today we still use education to control social power, albeit in ways that are harder to spot. For example – have you ever wondered /why/ schools in affluent neighborhoods constantly out-perform ones in poorer areas? It's not because rich people are genetically smarter, or better parents, or love their children more. Part of the answer is this: Most public schools in the United States are funded by property taxes (Kenyon, 2007) – in other words, by the neighborhood in which the school is located. Affluent neighborhoods, with their more expensive homes, generate higher property tax revenue than, say, low-income housing – and so, public schools in wealthy areas have that much more money to spend, than schools in economically disadvantaged areas. The result? Children in the wealthier public schools, not surprisingly, thrive, while the children in struggling neighborhoods receive a less effective education, and grow up more often to repeat the cycle of poverty.

I began today by talking about the past. Let us now take a trip forward in time, for a glimpse of one possible future for the fledgling schools of the Himalayas. Look around you. You may not know it, but this college – for all that it looks nothing like Pakistan – is the result of another school-building effort that began in France some two hundred and twenty years ago. In the late 1700's, rural France was a very different place (Schama, 1990), with widespread hunger and poverty, few schools, and political unrest – much like the world of *'Three Cups of Tea'* (2007). It was there that a young woman named Marie Rivier began the difficult task of building a school for her home village, which had none (Trudell, 2004). Others joined her efforts. This first school became several schools, and the women who worked so hard to build and maintain them formed a community of Sisters dedicated to teaching and serving the poor. In time this community would expand its work to other nations – and in 1933, it would found an institution of higher learning intended to open a world of new possibility, and influence, to the daughters of Nashua's mill workers (Thibodeau, 2010).

Rivier College, like the many other schools founded by the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary, stands as living proof that school projects do make a difference. The school-builders in *'Three Cups of Tea'* (2007) are at the start of their journey. They can only imagine the effect that the children and grandchildren of these first pupils arriving in their schools will have in restoring their country. We do not have to imagine. We *are* the effect, and the most recent chapter of Anne-Marie Rivier's legacy. Like the power of the written word, our very presence reaches across the boundaries of time and place to remind each other that change for the better, no matter how hard, is possible.

We must each find our own way to make a difference. For our part, as faculty of this College, it is through you that we make our difference – through your success that we measure our own. And if you and I each do our part, then perhaps, one day, someone will look back and say, it all started in September of 2010 on a small college campus in New Hampshire.

We are glad you are here.

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\* **Dr. NAOMI A. SCHOENFELD** is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Education at Rivier College, NH, where she is the program director for Undergraduate General Special Education and graduate Emotional and Behavioral Disorders programs. Dr. Schoenfeld holds a B.A. in Psychology from Queens College, CUNY, a M.Ed. in Special Education from the University of Arizona, and a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Development from Arizona State University. Born in New York, she spent much of her childhood in Jerusalem, Israel, before returning to the United States for college. Her current research interests include school-based behavior management strategies, the effects of anxiety disorders on student achievement, and the use of internet technology in teacher preparation programs.