

RESPECT

by Stephanie B. Perrin, Head, Walnut Hill School, and President, National Arts & Learning Foundation at Walnut Hill, 2000

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Last spring, as the head of Walnut Hill School, an independent arts high school in Massachusetts, I was called by a local TV station to comment on the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Startled when asked if we had a gun policy, I replied, “Yes! We don’t allow them!” When asked how we made sure we had no guns on campus, I had to say we had no mechanism for insuring that because we had never felt it necessary. As I hung up, I wondered if I was a pie-in-the-sky private school head, believing “It can’t happen here,” just as the principal at Columbine believed it couldn’t happen in his school. If it could happen in suburban Middle America in an affluent community, it could happen anywhere. Columbine High is no different from thousands of high schools across the country. What has gone so wrong? Can schools anywhere be considered “safe”?

Since that terrible day, there have been many analyses about what went wrong. The problem did not seem to be a lack of resources, divided families, or an urban drug culture. Commentators talked about increased violence on TV and the Internet, and parents who provided materially but didn’t know what their children were doing. The Colorado legislature, missing the point entirely, took the bold step of banning black trench coats in schools. The debate on gun control flared to life yet again. For me, however, the best analysis was offered by a nine-year-old boy, a student at colleague’s school, during a discussion with his fifth grade class about why the killings had taken place. He said, “Don’t they know that those boys only wanted to be noticed?”

His comment, I believe, speaks to the sadness, isolation, and hopelessness that were at the root of these acts. One of the major factors that led to the tragedy at Columbine was a school culture that, like so many in America, treated some people as valued and others as not. It was a culture that did not appear to embrace the values of acceptance of, and respect for, individuals; a culture of cliques, some of which were seen by students as “good” - jocks, pretty girls, handsome boys, and the college-bound - and others as “bad” - nerds, weirdoes, fags, and Goths. For an adolescent, whose peer group is the most important arbiter of his worth, to be “dissed” in this way is to be erased. Further, the adults in the school often seemed to support these judgments about who was acceptable and who was not. Certainly many adults are more comfortable around handsome, blonde football players with good grades than students in black trench coats, with shaved heads, white makeup, and chronically hostile “attitudes.”

Columbine High School seems to have been a place where whole groups of students were not accorded *basic respect*, were literally not “seen” as worthwhile people by their peers and by many adults. Consequently, two of those “unseen” students disconnected from a community that easily let them go. This disconnection appears to have led, as it often does, to feelings of victimization, isolation, and despair, a state where a violent act is sometimes the only way a

teenager feels he can make himself important and gain the basic “respect” and acknowledgment he longs for. This event, in the end, was a profound failure of human connection.

It is important to note that the culture at Columbine High School is not an isolated phenomenon. Its values are represented in many American high schools, where great emphasis is placed on *quantitative* measures of success and popularity, such as how much money families have, what kind of clothes students wear, how high their scores are, what colleges seniors will attend, how often the team wins. And almost no emphasis is placed on more *qualitative* measures of success, such as the quality of the relationships among members of the community, how civil people are to one other, and how safe and accepted each student feels him or herself to be.

It is interesting that these violent acts in schools, perpetrated by young boys, occurred when there is so much new work being published about boys in America. Harvard researcher Dr. William Pollack suggests in his book, Real Boys, which American culture and child-rearing practices require that boys be emotionally and physically separated from their mothers at a very young age and expected to deny any feelings that are not “manly.” Four-year-olds are told “boys don’t cry.” What these very young children consequently learn is that boys are not supposed to have a whole array of feelings such as sadness, fear, tenderness, and a love of beauty, that, in fact, they do have. The discontinuity between those emotions that are felt and those which are allowed to be expressed results in many boys feeling isolated and ashamed, and becoming “emotionally illiterate,” unable even to identify their feelings, let alone act on them appropriately. Pollack suggests that the deep sadness that results from this discontinuity often manifests itself as anger, which, in turn, can lead to violence directed both at others and the self. The suicide rate among boys has tripled since 1950, and four times as many boys as girls die as suicides. Homicides are the second leading cause of death among adolescents, and boys are 400 times more likely to die in this way than are girls. If the profile of girls in the United States looked like this, we would declare a national emergency.¹

If many American high schools do not meet the personal and social developmental needs of many of their students, are not “safe” for them, the question becomes, how can we create such schools? Are there models of school communities that meet those needs? I would suggest that one such model exists, perhaps unexpectedly, in high schools like Walnut Hill where the arts are part of the core curriculum. A growing body of research indicates that serious and disciplined participation in the arts contributes to academic success. What also appears to be true is that such participation is also supportive of the development of the personal and social skills students need to be able to build an accepting and positive school community.

A new government report, “Champions for Change,” presents several research projects completed in recent years about the value of arts education as a tool for general education. These studies suggest that students with a high involvement in the arts develop multiple skills and abilities, have higher academic self-concepts, gain in math skills, and have a stronger sense of identity, self-regulation, and resilience than students who are not involved in the arts. These same studies also identified those traits and skills developed by the arts-involved students that contribute to personal and social, as well as intellectual and artistic, development. For example, adolescents involved in the arts have a higher level of tolerance and empathy for others; are more likely to feel they are persons of worth and able to do things as well as others; are less likely to

make or tolerate racial slurs; and are less likely to watch TV. After-school programs which focused on the arts were found to be more successful than those based on other activities such as sports. All these positive gains from arts involvement were especially notable for children from low-income families. ⁱⁱ

Last year, a group of researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Education Arts Education Program came to Walnut Hill School as a part of their graduate theses. Utilizing a research procedure called “portraiture,” they interviewed faculty, students, and administrators in an effort to create a portrait of the school community based on the common themes or values that emerged from those conversations. They identified three core values: “The Educated Artist” recognized that the concept of a broad-based education for artists was highly valued by all; “The Gift Of Responsibility,” reflected the fact that many young artists, having been responsible for their own training from an early age, understand that a sense of responsibility for one’s self and work is essential to success; “Welcome As I Am,” indicated that at Walnut Hill people were respected and accepted for who they were and what they did, not where they came from, how they dressed, or who their families were. This last core value is one I wish to expand upon because it underscores my belief, developed over twenty years as a practitioner, that involving adolescents in the arts in a meaningful way supports positive social and personal development.

Fundamentally, “Welcome as I am” simply means that all members of the school community are respected as individuals and are welcome as they are. Could such simple *respect* be the glue that allows a community to live relatively peacefully? Could it be the basis of real safety in schools? These days “respect” seems a relatively toothless concept, something we complain about not getting enough of from young people. However, Dr. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot of the Harvard Graduate School of Education presents a more complex definition in her book, Respect. Most people think of respect as obedience, submission to a higher authority that has more status, knowledge, and skills. But respect is not about...compliance to imposed rules from the top...Real respect is a much more complex experience of empathy, trust, and connection. It grows in relationship and has to be nurtured every day.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The dictionary definition further reveals the complexity of respect as a concept. The word itself comes from the Latin *respectus*... “to look at, to look again, to see.” To respect another, then, means to truly “see” a person for who he is: your equal, not matter how different he may seem, *because you share a common humanity*. If you see others as like yourself in this most fundamental sense, you must treat them as you would wish to be treated yourself. The golden rule, still the most basic tenet of a civilized society, rests on the assumption of such mutual respect. It is, of course, much easier to hate, to disrespect, to *not* see others as like us, but as “those people.” So the Italians hate the Albanians, the Albanians hate the Serbs, the Hutus the Tutsi, the Indonesians the East Timorese, and on and on. In order to hate someone, you must first deny your common humanity.

This denial and hatred of others is often a mirror of one’s feelings toward oneself. Historian and author Eli Weisel has written, “He who hates you, hates me. He who hates me, hates you. He who hates everybody, hates himself.” True respect cannot be extended unless one respects oneself. You cannot offer to another what you do not yourself possess.

Respect, then, begins with self-respect, and one of the fundamental tenets of self-respect is knowledge of the self. This does not mean you like or admire all that you know yourself to be. But you can accept, respect, and have compassion for yourself, and thus for others.

Extending respect to others also requires that we distinguish between “like” or “agree with,” and “respect,” acknowledging the real struggle it can be to extend respect to someone whose views are antithetical to your own. It is not easy. In my own case, for example, as an old sixties liberal, I disagree with the ideas of the Christian Coalition and the views of people who are anti-abortion, pro-capital punishment, homophobic, and fond of French films. And I assume they don’t like my views any better. However, if we are to live together, I must struggle to respect them as people with whom I share the planet and who have a right to their opinion. I can disagree with them, vote against them, and choose whether or not spend time with them, but I cannot deny them the basic humanity we share, the respect due to them as fellow human beings.

Further, as Dr. Lightfoot comments, respect requires relationship developed over time and in some context of common values. It is best nurtured in doing meaningful work together, rather than being rhetorically demanded, however appropriately and righteously. It is a living process.

If we are to prevent instances like the killings at Columbine, then it seems to me essential that we create school communities which help students develop self-respect, respect for others, and a capacity for civil relationships. Therefore teaching students in school how to get along with and respect one another is much more important in creating truly safe schools than metal detectors, armed guards, or banning black coats. This is a piece of “back to basics” that has gotten lost in this culture of achievement and competition.

How do we teach respect in our schools and homes? We make it a publicly acknowledged priority, and assume full responsibility for making it happen. This means time, money, and attention must be given to the task. It means that there will have to be less of other things. As to how we actually teach respect, we do so primarily by example. It is not so much a matter of curriculum as of leadership by the adults. Students learn how to behave and think from what we do and how we treat them and each other rather than what we say. Parents and teachers can “demand” respect all they want, using all the correct terms, but it is their *lives*, not their words, that teach, and children are always watching and learning. The Quakers speak of letting one’s life speak, and that is the key concept behind the power of positive role models as the most effective tool for teaching respect.

Walnut Hill, like most schools where arts are central to the core curriculum, is a school community built on respect: respect for one’s own work and that of others; respect for history and culture; and self-respect. Further, self-respect and respect for others is based on real work judged against high expectations and standards. Teachers and coaches are respected and emulated as mentors and role models, and students are eager to join the adult world. No one is disrespected because of his hair color, political views, the way he dresses or his sexual orientation. Indeed, the only thing that reliably earns the disdain of young artists is failure to take the work seriously.

Walnut Hill, and schools like it, has a tremendous advantage in terms of creating and sustaining a school culture based on respect, acceptance, and the true valuing of diversity because, as young artists, the students share many common values, are self-motivated because *they* have chosen this path, and possess positive personal identities. The culture of such schools is not one of power or of “good” and “bad” cliques. Students are not called jocks, fags, nerds, or weirdoes; they are called dancers, musicians, actors, painters, and writers, identities of which they are proud. Differences among students are seen as positive, as an indication of a highly prized individuality. A multicultural environment is not something to be “tolerated” or to be “celebrated” once a year, but is a necessity because it creates the richest environment for growth and learning. Little is learned from those who are just like you, and young artists are always seeking new ideas and new ways of looking at old ideas.

The core of common values and vocabulary shared by these young artists makes it possible for them to transcend cultural and racial differences, reaching across the many barriers that can isolate students. A chamber music quartet at Walnut Hill, for example, is composed of the four people who are the best match artistically, and that may well be students who range in age from 13 to 17, who come from three different countries, and who speak three different languages. All can speak Mozart, however. Their affection and respect for one another is based on working together, on developing long term relationships around a common effort that is the basis for real mutual respect. Again, it is not rhetoric that builds respect; it is sustained interpersonal experience. It is action.

The education of young artists also requires the intentional and conscious development of the whole self. Emphasis is placed on developing creative thinking, physical discipline, skill in relationships and working with others, and “emotional “intelligence,” as well as on more traditional skills. Feelings, understood and utilized, are seen as necessary to the work each person does. Boys in a school for the arts are not only expected to be passionate and full of feeling — they *must* be if they are to be mature artists. Further, it is not a narcissistic preoccupation with the self that is encouraged, but a level of self-knowledge that is an *a priori* condition for the development of true self-respect. It is the narcissistic impulse, so characteristic of adolescents, given positive form and direction.

It is also important to remember that in schools the influence of peers is as important, if not more so, than that of adults, in determining the nature of the community. At Walnut Hill, the peer culture, as reflected in the Harvard study, is one in which respect for others is central. All schools espouse the “right” values publicly, but, with all due respect, it is the inmates who run the asylum, and schools are only safe if the peer culture is self-regulating. This is a crucial and often over-looked point. Students must care about and for one another. Adults cannot do it alone. Interestingly, one of the reasons given for the positive effect on students involved in arts after-school programs was the better quality of peer relations among students in the arts when compared to non-arts programs.

Teenagers who identify themselves, and work, as artists have the priceless gift of loving something more than themselves, something that connects them to the world and allows them to translate their deepest feelings into work that can be communicated and shared. It moves them from self-involvement to involvement with the world because the arts are about communication.

A very important factor is that these students have chosen this work themselves, and so are motivated from within to achieve. That desire to learn, to achieve, often characterizes all their work in school, and will characterize their expectations of work all their lives, no matter what their ultimate careers. When parents are asked what concerns them most about education, the two concerns that consistently rise to the top are school safety and how to motivate their children. Young artists are self-motivated, and, I would argue, they know how to live together in harmony.

The boys at Columbine High were described, and self-described, as outcasts in the school community. And, as described in the media, this characterization was not surprising. However, even the talented and generally accomplished students who come to Walnut Hill, almost always described themselves similarly, as “fish out of water” in the “normal” schools from which they come. They often felt undervalued or misunderstood – not seen – by their peers or the school itself. Where does the boy, clean-cut and smart though he may be, who plays the violin three hours a day and loves to talk about classical music fit into the typical American high school? The answer is nowhere. At best he is ignored; at worst, ridiculed, because involvement in the arts in teenage high school culture is definitely not cool for boys. One student, a young actor who had given up a place on his hometown varsity football team to come to Walnut Hill, told me that one of the best things about coming to Walnut Hill was not being called a “theater fag” anymore. The father of a young musician, who had come from a fine high school where no one showed interest in his music, described his son as “a fish in water” at Walnut Hill and was grateful that he had been able to give his son what we all want for all our children: a school where he felt acknowledged and appreciated. If even these students felt marginalized at their schools, one can only imagine the isolation of the boys at Columbine.

Students arriving at Walnut Hill often speak about their relief at finding themselves in a place where they feel accepted and understood. They talk freely about their passion for their work and their deepest dreams and fears because it is safe to do so. One new 9th grader said: “I love everybody here and even the ones I don’t like I will get to love, I’m sure!” Naïve, yes, but hers is a world view that can be developed and transformed into a mature capacity for respect and connection, rather than dismissed by cynics too fearful of their own buried longings to encounter such feelings. To me, she represents how teenagers really are, given the opportunity to allow their highest aspirations full expression in a disciplined form, and given the gift of high expectations and standards. We worry that adolescents are narcissistic, idealistic, “unrealistic” (I believe it was the actress Ruth Gordon who said she met her goals in life by “never facing the facts”), and always pushing the limits. However, these are the very qualities that are the basis for creative thinking, risk-taking, faith, and a capacity for perseverance based on internal motivation. Their ideals *are* high. Their vision *is* big. They are passionate. And, unlike many adolescents, they know how to work, often for years and years, to reach their goals.

These young artists are the kind of people we in this country are looking for as we approach the millennium: full of idealism and passion coupled with the skills, motivation, and discipline to express those qualities in their work and in the world. These young people will be active workers and good citizens no matter what careers they pursue or where they go in the world.

Some of what I am talking about has been seen in the recent film, “Music of the Heart,” about the work of Roberta Gauspari, a gifted teacher in East Harlem. Her program of teaching young

students, many of whom never would have been identified as “talented,” to play the violin in ensemble was shown to not only develop musical skills in her students, but also to develop self-esteem based on performing to high expectations. Ms. Gauspari was portrayed as the quintessential arts teacher: demanding, loving, impossible, passionate, and driven. And her students responded as students usually do when a skilled teacher asks a lot of them; they loved her, they hated her, and they did beautiful work and were very proud of what they accomplished together. She gave her young musicians hope and vision, taught them to work well and to overcome a multitude of racial and economic barriers in the process of making music. The film is about making music. It is equally about making strong people. As Ms. Gauspari said, “Everything I teach...is teaching them to play their lives better.”^{iv}

If schools where arts are central to the curriculum are “safe” schools, should every high school be an arts school? Of course not. (Although if American schools made the serious study of the arts part of the curriculum from kindergarten on, as they do in Taiwan and Korea, we would produce many more young artists.) But it is one very effective pathway that responds to the challenge of creating schools that develop in students the capacity to live civilly with their peers and the adults they depend on to teach them. Such an “education in respect” must come from a focus on interpersonal relationships by the leaders of the school, high expectations, discipline, and from reasonable regulations as opposed to oppressive rules and metal detectors. It must come from common values publicly supported and often spoken about, as well as from a deep respect for all individuals in the school community. This last is a necessity even for those children who are most difficult. No school is a utopia. Indeed, that would be boring. Difficult children must, of course, be responded to, but with dignity and fairness. Real “safety” comes from where it always has: from a loving heart, characterized by the self-acceptance that makes possible real acceptance of others. This is where safety lies and why teaching students to respect and accept themselves and others is so vitally important.

I believe that what killed the children of Columbine High School, including those who killed themselves, was a school culture devoid of respect and relationship, where power and popularity were synonymous and some members of the community were seen as less valuable than others. Yes, I believe we do need to ban guns, be mindful of the violence our children are exposed to in the media, and set limits for young people. But most of all we need to create schools where true self-respect and respect for others are central values that are lived every day, where each child feels “welcome as I am.”

This is the work of schools as well as families. The question every school must ask itself, and take responsibility for, is “what kind of people graduate from our school?” Young people spend more time in school than anywhere else, and more time with their peers than parents and other adults, so it is our responsibility as educators to teach them in school how to live in the world. If what our children are learning in school is that some people don’t matter and that some are better than others, then we can expect a self-interested and callous society to result. We can expect Columbine. We can expect a society that, however technologically advanced, will ultimately self-destruct because the challenge of the next century is not technology but loss of community and meaning. In the end, teaching our children to get along with each other in a truly respectful and civil manner is as important as any of the other skills and ideas in the curriculum. Perhaps it is most important. We ignore this responsibility at our peril. If children lose their spirit in school,

they are lost for life. “Those boys just wanted to be noticed.” Finally they were, in the most heartbreaking of ways.

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ⁱ Pollack, William, Real Boys, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1998

² Fiske, Edward B., Editor, Champions of Change, The Arts Education Partnership and The President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, Washington, D.C., 1999

ⁱⁱⁱ Lawrence-Lightfoot, Sara, Respect, Persus Books, Reading, MA, 1999

^{iv} The New York Times, Sunday, October 24, 1999