

## HOW SMART ARE WE?

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson

Presented May 16, 2004

*Listening for Our Song*, the collected meditations we've given our high school graduates this year, includes Jane Rzepka's "The Pillow:"

*Last summer, when our family was visiting Maine, we slept wonderfully well. We just couldn't get over how soft the pillows were! I was so impressed, in fact, that I dug out a Vermont Country Store catalog and immediately ordered a couple of feather pillows - the softest they make.*

*One fine day the pillows arrived. After a lot of fanfare, I curled up for a nap, and yes, it was indeed the softest, most restful pillow on earth.*

*But it smelled funny.*

*The pillow drove me crazy. I couldn't place the smell -- but finally, lying there half-awake one night, the smell took me to Wisconsin, to my sister's farm. I knew what that feather pillow smelled like. It smelled like a chicken coop!*

*Sometimes in life we get exactly what we ask for. I ordered feather pillow and I got a pillow that smelled like feathers. We get what we thought we wanted; it doesn't seem right some how; and the problem is so obvious that we can't seem even see it -- or smell it. Whoever said that we make the bed and then have to lie in it, has a point.*

Now this story, I'm sure, could lead one down any number of paths. Where I'm headed with it has something to do with high school graduates, Unitarian Universalist high school graduates. I'm interested in what a certain fact about them, and our reaction to it, might tell us about who we all are, and perhaps who we could be. In our graduates, in at least this one way, I suspect that we may have gotten exactly what we wanted, and yet now to me it doesn't seem right somehow. And I wonder how long we're going to feel good lying in this bed.

The fact about our graduates that's sending me off like this appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* more than a year ago, I understand. Our local newspaper columnist Leon Satterfield says he hardly ever reads the *Wall Street Journal* - I hardly ever do - but because Leon read and repeated the *Journal's* report, now I know it and find I have to deal with it. The fact is that, of all the religious group affiliations reported by high schoolers taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the group who averaged the highest score on the test were the Unitarian Universalists - and they were highest not by a little. The U.U. average score was 1209. The next three groups - Jews, Quakers, and Hindus - had averages ranging 50 to 100 points lower than ours. The group who rounded out the top ten - Mennonites, Reformed Church of America, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Bahais - had averages ranging 100 to 130 points lower. Leon speculated that his childhood religion didn't make the list because SAT right answers didn't include "little outbursts of rapture." Beyond that, he said, "I'm not going to draw other conclusions from these rankings. You go ahead." Oh, Leon, get thee behind me. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, but who o'er leaps the devil? Smart people? Well, let's see.

I suspect you know that the value and breadth of the skills SAT tests measure is controversial. Since Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* got us all talking about multiple intelligences ten years ago, educators have worked to diversify their scales of evaluation. Still, if we accept that the SAT provides some measure of "Scholastic Aptitude" and the Scholastic Aptitude has something to do with capacity for scholarship, we can't help but be pleased to know that our children can demonstrate it. When William Ellery Channing proclaimed the initial elements of our approach to religious life, in his 1819 sermon "Unitarian Christianity," he began by assuring his fellow Christians of the authority we would continue to give to scripture. However, he then had to say, "We profess not to know a book which demands a more frequent exercise of reason than the Bible. ... We feel it our bounden duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually, to compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit, to seek in the nature of the subject, and the aim of the writer, his true meaning; and in general, to make use of what is known, for what is difficult, and for discovering new truths." This kind of scholarship is the heart pumping within our current covenant to affirm and promote "the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. It is the deepest soul of our claim to draw on "humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit." (U.U.Association Bylaws) In so far as the SAT exposes the ability to use reason to find truth, the first conclusion we might like to draw from our test-score fact is that our kids have gotten exactly what we've been trying to give them. How could we be anything but pleased?

Well, if pleased were our only response, we could well be. We could feel completely right having gotten exactly what we wanted. But there's another "p" word that often accompanies "pleased" when it comes to our kids, isn't there? Pleased and proud. I heard it several times following last Sunday's youth service. "You must be so proud of your daughter." And I am. But not too much, I hope. For there's a certain smell that comes with pride which I'm not sure we want to get used to. It serves neither our kid's spirits or our spirits well. Is it obvious?

Some of the taint in our apparent success becomes more obvious if we examine the relative number of kids involved. Our high scoring U.U. kids are surely also the smallest group of those ranked. The Quakers perhaps are only somewhat more numerous in our country. Mennonites may not be too far out of our range. But Jews and Episcopalians, I know, outnumber us by a factor of 10; Presbyterians and Lutherans even more. Rather than a reflection of religious inspiration, SAT score success are more likely a reflection of socio-economic advantage, and I know that, for all our affirmation of pluralism and diversity, we are among the most class-bound sects in our nation. Is that the unpleasant whiff I get from our "fact" - that academic success is inextricably bound up with class provincialism? Should our scores simply enhance our embarrassment that after almost 200 years of associating, we're still a "Brahmin" faith, unable (or is it unwilling) to speak to all but a miniscule slice of the Humanity we claim to value so highly?

Perhaps, but its not that which keeps me up at night. What I find more threatening in seeing these numbers as a success is rather in a danger to our self-esteem. I'm not worried about its abasement, not for us a group. I'm worried about its aggrandizement. I'm worried about the temptation to take on our children's particular high ability as evidence of our own general superiority. I worry about our seeing "scholastic aptitude" as a measure of "intelligence." And I worry about this little fact feeding what I see as our greatest weakness, our tendency to encourage the rest of our beloved "humanity" to see, and largely eschew, us as a home for only one kind of people, for those with an an "intellectual"

approach to religion (or even to anti-religion.) As a chicken-coop-smell comes intrinsically with feathers, I fear that what comes inextricably with keeping scores is snobbery.

Joseph Epstein, professor at Northwestern University and former editor of the magazine *The American Scholar*, recently published a book entitled simply *Snobbery*. I invite us to try on the shoe he offers, to see if it fits:

- "The essence of snobbery," he says, "is arranging to make yourself feel superior at the expense of other people." (p.15)

- "A person who is not a snob is content merely to think a wrong opinion mistaken and let it go at that; it surely doesn't speak to the character or anything else essential about the person who expressed it. For the snob, a wrong opinion is usually more than stupid; it's an utter disqualification." (p.10)

- "Among people who fancy themselves, in the loosest sense of the term, intellectuals - snobbery runs more rampant than bacteria through the kitchen of a Tijuana slow-food restaurant."

- "Whenever intellectuality is on display, an air of edginess, contention, one-upsmanship, put-down, or general nervousness ... usually hovers over the proceedings. (p.142-3).

And, as Rebecca Goldstein posits in her novel *The Mind-Body Problem*, the further an academic's subject is from the truth, the more snobbish he or she is likely to be. (She is comparing mathematicians and physicists to historians and other cultural scholars. How much more susceptible to this danger must religionists be?) The snobbery of intellectuals, Epstein concludes, "may be owing to the uncertainty behind the mask of authoritativeness intellectuals feel the need to wear. (p.144-5.)

The historical perspective Epstein brings to his study only heightens my dis-ease. "One hears little about snobbery before the eighteenth century," he says, because "until then there was a ready acceptance of social rank. ... Snobbery thrives where society is most open. ... The social fluidity that democracy makes possible, allowing people to climb from the bottom to the top of the ladder of social class in a generation or two, provides a fine breeding ground for snobbery and gives much room to exercise condescension, haughtiness, (and) affectation." (p.29)

I find myself wondering, whether our religious devotion to "democracy" alongside "scholarship" makes us all the more tempted to be snobs.

And there's no escape in reverse snobbery, says Epstein. It "may be more difficult to shuck off than actual snobbery, for it proceeds in part from a distaste for snobs and snobbishness, but also from a wish to assert one's superiority to snobbery generally, which itself can seem suspiciously like a snobbish act." (p.11)

In this light, now, I invite you to consider the words of some of the songs, from our Singing the Living Tradition, which I could have picked for us to sing this morning.

*"O what a piece of work are we,  
how marvelously wrought;  
the quick contrivance of the hand,  
the wonder of our thought,  
the wonder of our thought."* (Number 313)

*"We are the earth upright and proud ...  
Our minds will find the ways  
to live in peace and praise.  
Our day is just beginning." (Number 301)*

The song I chose to open, "Life is the greatest gift," (Number 331), while proclaiming that "mind is the greatest gift of all" at least seemed redeemed by its "grateful spirit."

Of course I realize that these lyrics, and the words of our identity statement, are written as a call for us celebrate our place in ALL humanity, our Universalist spirit. But ask yourself, now, more deeply, how did or do you feel about these damned SAT scores. Hugh Kingsmill has written: "Snobbishness is the assertion of the will in social relations as lust is in the sexual. (It) is the desire for what divides men and the inability to value what unites them." (Epstein p.17)

Of course we could trust our kids to lead us away from this temptation. My daughter, Sally, as a high school sophomore, is just beginning her run at upholding our group record. For her this year's test was the PSAT; the SAT comes next year. But she is surrounded by older friends whose time at bat is now. Some weeks ago, kind of out of the blue, she said to me, you know, "Anyone, once they get into college, who still even remembers what their SAT scores were is living a pretty pathetic life." More power to her I must say - I who 38 years after taking the test, probably still remember my scores accurately. If not, I probably know exactly which file drawer in my home office preserves the original hard-copy proof.

Confucius, in words captured in our songbook as "Grieve Not Your Heart", number 186, sets our better test:

*"From wise and foolish both alike  
we should try to learn,  
for one can show us how to live,  
the other what to spurn.*

*Be fair to people when they err,  
when good, your pleasure show;  
their faults be quick to understand,  
in judging them be slow."*

We need his help, and much more, to remember that our faith is not one of either intelligence or intellectualism. It is rather one of thoughtfulness, in both of its meanings. It is the willingness to consider deeply, to explore broadly, our lives. It is also the ability, as we do this considering, to keep the interests of ALL others in our minds AND hearts. It is a quest, even more than for truth, for wisdom.

But I suspect that more of us in this room than just me need to remember and repeat the prayer my English colleague Vivian Pomeroy gave us:

*Forgive us for repelling people*

*by the way we set a good example;  
Forgive us that we expect perfection  
from those to whom we show none;  
Forbid that we should use  
our little idea of goodness  
as a spear to wound those who are different*

*(Singing the Living Tradition #477)*

Joseph Epstein says, "Snobbery will die on the day when none of us needs reassurance of his or her worth, when society is so well-balanced as to eliminate every variety of injustice, when fairness rules, and kindness and generosity, courage and honor are all rightly revered." On some Sundays, we sing words from this book which look forward to just such a day, don't we? "Please," Epstein says, "don't mark your calendar just yet. (p.251.) Still he goes on, "an intelligent person of a certain age ought to be able to fight free of all forms of snobbery, if only to keep his or her mind clear for larger thoughts." (p.248)

Albert Einstein, his work close enough to truth, I think, to fight off most forms of snobbery, once said, "A person who is religiously enlightened appears to me to be one who has, to the best of his ability liberated himself from the fetters of his selfish desires and is preoccupied with thoughts, feelings and aspirations to which he clings because of their superpersonal value." (Union Theological School Address, 1941)

Our closing song is "Praise the Source of Faith and Learning," number 158.