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# The Course of Educational Change: Challenge and Opportunity

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## **The Course of Educational Change: Challenge and Opportunity**

*Keynote Address from the Catholic Higher Education Collaborative (CHEC) Conference on Catholic School Financing, University of Notre Dame, September 23, 2013*

Lee Shulman, Stanford University

Six years ago, I served as the convener of this group's first meeting, at the Carnegie Foundation in California. As I reflected back on that meeting, I was reminded of several things. One was some advice I had received from a good friend, the late John Gardner. Gardner served as president of the Carnegie Foundation, and was thus my predecessor, albeit some 50 years earlier than I. He left the foundation in 1965 to serve as Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare for President Lyndon Johnson after the assassination of President Kennedy. When he arrived at the department, he was given the responsibility to design and deliver the legislation we now know as "the Great Society," from the civil rights act to the voting rights act. In a memorable address, he described the daunting challenges facing the department in these words that I hope you will remember: "*What we have before us are some breath-taking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems.*"

When I asked him many years later, as I was considering taking the Carnegie presidency (having never administered anything in my life, as I had spent my entire career teaching and doing research)—"What does Carnegie do?"—John Gardner looked at me and said, "Lee, Carnegie convenes. Carnegie brings together people who might never, ever enter into a deep, abiding, and warm conversation with one another. Carnegie does it in an atmosphere that inspires trust and respect." And he said, "You know what? When you engage people in that sort of convening conversation, things can happen that might never, ever have happened otherwise."

"Carnegie convenes." I thought about that observation because last Wednesday night was the first night of the Jewish festival of the Tabernacles, Sukkot. I sat with my wife and dear friends in a Sukkah, a fragile hut in which Jews traditionally sit and eat meals for the seven days or eight days

of Sukkot. I thought about it at two levels. First of all, I thought about it because of the contrast between the fragility of a sukkah the magnificent church where we all gathered together for the last few hours. Is there a more beautiful structure on the face of the earth than the Basilica in which we just prayed together?

Look at this building where we have just eaten, and the incredible dome under which we sit. My fellow Jews spend ten days in beautiful synagogues for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, for the high holy days of the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement, which we celebrated a couple of weeks ago. Five days after the 24-hour solemnity and fast of Yom Kippur, after praying for forgiveness, we sit in these fragile huts, in which the roof cannot be solid. If it rains, the rain must be able to come in, and you must be able to look up and see the heavens and the stars. That juxtaposition between firmness and solidity on the one hand, and fragility and vulnerability on the other-- both of those attributes characterize our lives, both as human beings and as educators. This thought struck me, as I sat in a sukkah and looked ahead to joining you here at Notre Dame, as did the requirement that one eat in the sukkah in the company of others. It is not sufficient to eat alone.

The other thing that struck me was this: on the Sabbath, in the middle of Sukkot, a particular book of the Hebrew Bible is always read. Now which book do you think it might be? My guess is that no one will guess correctly because the book that was read yesterday on Shabbat, in its entirety, was *Ecclesiastes*, which in Hebrew is *Kohelet*. The word *Ecclesiastes* is the translation of the Hebrew word *Kohelet*. The book begins "Devrei Kohelet ben David" or "These are the words of Kohelet, the son of David, who was king over Israel." The traditional interpretation is that it was written by Solomon. Why is he called Kohelet and what is the significance of that name? I'd like to give you a couple reasons that are related to our meeting.

The Hebrew word that is translated into the Greek *Ecclesiastes* is usually translated into English as teacher or preacher. Wrong translation. The word *Kohelet* comes from a Hebrew root that is the same root of the word "convening" and "community." The word for community is *kahal* or *kehillah*. The reason it's probably called *teacher* is because teachers need to bring the people together in order to teach them. It is a book that contains the provocative thoughts of a convener, someone who brings people together, as a community. These are the words of someone who brings people together as a community, the kind of words that need to be heard by members of that community.

Look at the lovely juxtaposition of bringing people together, and Sukkot, where people come together in this fragile, vulnerable hut. Now think

of what the message of *Kohelet* is. If you read over *Ecclesiastes* carefully, and by the way, the reason so many of you are called “ecclesiastics” is because you are people who bring others together in congregation for purposes of worship and learning. That’s what *Ecclesiastes* means. The idea is you don’t sit alone in your own hut; you do not fulfill the *mitzvah* of Sukkot sitting alone. It is only fulfilled if you welcome to your sukkah a large group of neighbors, relatives, kids, and friends, to join you under the fragility of this roof.

And what is *Ecclesiastes* about? The most famous opening line is “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Of course vanity of vanities does not describe arrogance or modesty. The Hebrew word, *hevel*, describes nothingness, emptiness, shadows, and soft winds, experiences that are evanescent, here now and gone tomorrow. Kohelet is saying that all those things that you’re so sure about-- they’re not permanent. They’re here today, gone tomorrow. “All the rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full,” and yet the rivers keep running, indeed they must. Read the words of *Ecclesiastes*: “there’s nothing new under the sun.” You may think you’ve created something quite new, but you’ll likely discover that its novelty is an illusion.

You would think that reading this book would be terribly depressing, and yet it isn’t. And I’d like to tell you why I think it isn’t and how it connects to our meeting on the challenges of education. I was talking to someone about what had happened in the six years since our last meeting and the report was, “Well, we’ve accomplished a lot, but a lot of the things we’ve hoped to accomplish haven’t happened yet. Not all the institutions have remained steadfast and active, new ones have come in, some have dropped out. And most of the problems remain.”

And I thought to myself: *Ecclesiastes*. The message of *Ecclesiastes*, as I read it, is the message of those of us trying to create a field of Catholic education; in fact, for those of us working in the field of education at large. I’ve been in this field, in spite of my obvious youth, for over 50 years as a teacher and as a scholar, and sometimes I get really discouraged. I get really discouraged because it seems that we work on the same problems again and again, and I wake up on Monday morning it looks like they’re still there, and I ask myself, “Did I waste my time?” But I think the message of the social sciences and of history and of a number of fields that contribute to the theory and practice of education is the message of *Ecclesiastes*.

There are some problems of the world that are in a deep sense intractable. It’s in the nature of the world that we’re never going to get them “solved”. There is something Sisyphean about them. That doesn’t mean that we don’t

make a difference and it doesn't mean that our efforts are in some way wasted or unfulfilled. On the contrary, the great challenge to us as educators, as lawyers, as physicians, as priests, is to recognize that the challenge we face is not one that's going to be solved by the ultimate vaccine, by the panacea. That isn't the world that we are fated, and yes, blessed to live in. It's a world that's more challenging than that, and yet, it's a world that demands and, in spite of the frustrations, rewards our efforts.

I've a friend in Israel who gave up his extraordinary research program in social psychology to create and run a center for peace education between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East. Upon contributing to a book in his honor, I read that the first definition of peace education concerns "research that deals with problems of intractable conflicts between people." How could you do work on intractable conflict? Well, are some of you working on the practical challenges of moral goodness? Welcome to the club. There are problems that in the big sense are intractable, but in the local, smaller sense, we can make big changes.

Is there anyone here who cannot, in the face of this intractable problem of Catholic education, or of general education, describe individual students who were changed forever by the action of a teacher, maybe by their own action? Of a school that was transformed from a center for failure to a center of glory and success, to neighborhoods that didn't overnight become perfect, but got better because of the presence of a good school and committed educators?

What this observation also relates to--and I say this to those of you in your research universities--much like my own--making judgments about whether to promote or tenure some of your faculty, and where the criterion used to be, and still is in many places like the standard at Stanford: did the faculty member do the kind of scholarship that yielded contributions to theory that constitute universal principles of knowledge? Are their findings generalizable in the broadest possible sense and not merely local? As Kohelet would have taught us, we are now discovering in the social and biological sciences that most claims for universal, generalizable truth are unwarranted. Almost all knowledge claims must be tempered by local contexts, individual and group differences among people, historical changes, cultural variations, genetic diversity and the like.

Do any of you remember the extraordinary piece in the *New York Times* a couple of months ago about clinical trials that dealt with Avastin, the drug that was designed for brain cancers? They did this extraordinarily massive clinical trial because Avastin is a very promising drug that was already being

used, but the result of the clinical trial showed no significant difference between using Avastin and using conventional therapies without Avastin. Well, Genentech and other labs with a lot of money invested in this type of drug began tearing out whatever hair they had left. Then the person who wrote the article quoted the principal investigator who said, “We’re asking the wrong question. We’re asking whether this intervention makes a huge significant difference for everybody.” The fact is what we’re learning about human beings is that almost nothing makes a universal impact on everybody. When they began to mine the data on Avastin, you know what was found? There were some people using it who didn’t die, who kept on living because of Avastin, even though they had a glioblastoma that was supposed to kill them in three months. There were others for whom it apparently had no impact. With a very large sample, looking for a significant “main effect” for avastin, there was no significant difference. But what the investigators didn’t understand is why did it work with a certain subsample and not with the others? That turns out to be the smart question.

By the same token, very few of our schools will ever work for everyone. The teacher who is the superb in one setting might change schools and become mediocre. Is that because he or she was not a superb teacher in the first place? Not at all. It’s because we cannot expect any human being to be a pedagogical panacea. That’s part of the fragility, the uncertainty, that Kohelet asks us to come together to contemplate. That’s why the congregation of educators of which you are members will not experience inexorable success for all your endeavors so that ten years from now we can declare victory and all go home to our tenured professorships and, for those of you in urban schools of your diocese, to your now totally filled coffers supporting us financially. No, because the world just doesn’t work that way, neither for our reform efforts nor for our research.

Six years ago, at the time of the initial Carnegie Convening on Catholic Education, Father Tim Scully asked me to prepare an opening talk on how a *field* of Catholic education could be buttressed by the type of applied research effort that would provide empirical evidence to support, guide and test our educational reform efforts. We didn’t want the phrase “faith-based education” to describe approaches to teaching and learning that avoided the collection of evidence. Indeed, we ought not compromise the quality of evidence that we use to decide how to run our schools. We were talking in Palo Alto about what it would take to create such a field of Catholic educational scholarship, and the question was how many of your Catholic universities already had or

were prepared to mount efforts in the social sciences and in education devoted to getting smarter about an evidence-based Catholic education?

I think it's ironic that one of the things that has happened at Stanford in the last three years is that we have initiated a doctoral research concentration in Education and Jewish studies. We received gifts that support an endowed professorship and seven fully supported Ph.D. candidates at any given time, fully supported to be prepared in one of the finest schools of education in the world to be scholars, teachers and thought leaders in the field of Jewish education. I challenge every one of your Catholic research universities to create a similar endowed chair and similar subsidized graduate fellowships. That's how you will build a field of Catholic education. If my colleagues and I could successfully persuade donors to contribute the several million dollars needed by Stanford--which is not exactly a religious institution--to create this program, then my challenge to you is to develop similar endowed programs at your universities, which are homes to a deep commitment to religious education. Indeed, I think that the situation will become even more fruitful if we can use the example of Stanford to expand our work to the study of Catholic and Jewish education and evangelical education, and please God, Muslim education, in non-religious universities as well, in places like the University of Michigan and Berkeley and Ohio State and Columbia and Yale.

These are challenges for research and understanding that all of us who are civically engaged share. More children in the world, I'm told, are educated in religiously affiliated institutions than in secular institutions, and yet schools of education and departments in the social sciences, by and large, flee from the study of these questions as if they were toxic. They express concerns about the establishment clause of the first amendment, but I seriously doubt that attempting to understand deeply the ways in which education and religion interact is forbidden by the first amendment.

I want to conclude by stating that I, for one, identify strongly with the words and thoughts of Kohelet. I take delight to see the energy with which all of you here, including the 25-30 of you who began with us six years ago in Palo Alto, are still working at the challenges of urban education and of the preparation of teachers, leaders and scholars for Catholic schools in those areas. I am not discouraged that after six years of the rivers running into the sea of Catholic education that the sea of the field of Catholic education is not filled. These are problems that have earned the right to be intractable. These are problems for which we have learned the lesson that we need to address them smaller problem by smaller problem, and not through big

theories, but through what the sociologist Robert Merton called theories of the middle range and maybe even theories of the little range. I suspect we are going to find truth locally in particulars in the same way that medicine will progress when we recognize that patients with *these* kinds of genes living in *this* type of environment with *this* type of social support will respond positively to *this* type of medication or intervention, if it's part of a management scheme that supports patients in certain ways—and even that kind of conditional conclusion is likely to change in another decade. If that sounds messy, we need to learn to live with it because that's what our educational generalizations are going to look like, too. You want a universal method of training teachers? I have great faith in Alverno College led by the remarkable Sister Mary Diez, but Mary will tell you I'm exaggerating about her powers, because she is so splendidly honest.

This is not bad news; in fact, it's good news. It's good news because maybe it will give permission to the scholars on our faculties to start doing different kinds of research, to start realizing that they can get tenure and recognition and be celebrated and even get an occasional salary raise by doing quite local research. Big knowledge grows out of aggregating lots of little knowledge, not because it leads to bigger generalizations, but to more subtle and nuanced conditional observations. I think that political science may be finally getting over the myth of positive political theory and recognizing what we learn in Chile helps us to understand Chile and may not help us to understand Brazil, New Orleans, South Bend or Salt Lake City.

In the Spirit of Kohelet, I offer you another biblical interpretation. Most contemporary scholars reject the notion that Kohelet, identified as the son of David, could really be Solomon. The text doesn't fit with the era of Solomon even though the text sounds like it could have come from the wise and worldly son of David. Too many of the words in the text turn out to have Aramaic or Persian origins, languages that emerged in the Biblical context much later than Solomon, indeed long after the destruction of the first temple.

So, why is Kohelet called the son of David? I offer Shulman's unauthorized rabbinical interpretation. I think it's because we are all the sons and daughters of David. All of us are descendants of David, from the Messiah to the most sinful of all, are members of the Davidic family once we reflect on what the character and symbol of David represents. Is there a figure in the Hebrew Bible, in the bible we all share, who combines so many contradictory characteristics as David? David, the psalmist, the player of the harp, who

sings onto the Lord? Or David, the shepherd warrior who uses the sling to kill Goliath? The harp or the sling? David, the virtuous man of God who sits before God and dreams of building his sanctuary? Or David, the seducer of Bathsheba, whose firstborn child dies as Nathan prophesized because of how sinful it was to arrange for Uriah to be killed so he could have his way with Bathsheba? David, the lover of Bathsheba? Or David, the lover of Jonathon?

David is one of the most fragile and vulnerably complicated, contradictory and dialectally interesting characters in our shared tradition, and yet look at how important he is in our traditions: the ancestor of the Messiah, the founder of Zion. I think what Kohelet, the son of David, represents is all of us--as protagonists and as agents, and the institutions that we create, convene, and congregate are unavoidably complex, contradictory, and in many ways, in a tension between values. In spite of all that, the type of wisdom in Kohelet flows from the house of David. This conception of making palpable differences in an intractable world flows from the sort of congregating around education that we're here to do in South Bend, Indiana. I take personal delight in the privilege of continuing to observe and participate in efforts.

I'll finish with the blessing of Vitruvius, the great Roman architect. Vitruvius was the first architect who wrote about architecture and said there were three characteristics that were associated with sound design, and we're here to talk about the design of education and of institutions that educate. The three characteristics were: *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas*. *Firmitas*: firmness, sturdiness ... will it hold up? You've got to do something here that will hold up. It doesn't have to hold up forever, but it must have integrity given its purpose, which leads to Vitruvius' second feature for great design: *utilitas*. It's got to be useful. It not only has to stand up, but it's got to work, and it's got to have practical consequences. But the real blessing is Vitruvius' third feature for any sound design: *venustas*, delight, beauty, generativity. Because if something is merely sturdy and useful and not delightful, we would never have the pleasure of praying in the basilica where we prayed this afternoon, and we would not have the joy and the frustration of wrestling with the world as educators. May all your endeavors be a blessing.

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