

First of all, congratulations to all of you. . .and to your parents and your teachers. I want to say that you have made great progress learning to take care of one another and respect one another over these years; and unfortunately, just as you get good at it, you are leaving us.

As a class you have also been very troubled by injustice across the planet. I know that. After 300 million years of hunting and gathering, loving and fighting, sex, drugs, rock and roll are we making any real progress learning to take care of one another on this planet?

Have we as a human species learned to behave any better after all these years? Charles Darwin, at least one thoughtful student of how species adapt over time (one of your favorite subjects, adaptation) observed that all of us, not just the Blue Footed Boobie, are forever caught in a "tangled bank of unceasing struggle, selfishness, and death. . . ." or as Rosie Speck said in her "This I Believe" paper, we learned in WW II "how dangerous we are to one another and every living thing."

Are we making any progress? Or still just as tangled? Well, we have eliminated smallpox. Smallpox killed millions and millions of people. So that's a plus; and we can see tiny bits of things now like DNA twists and turns, and so we have begun to fix and heal some very sick children. That's a plus.

We finally see that we must take better care of our planet. But we may not fix it in time. I know you worry about your children and whether any drinking water and trees and polar bears will be left for them. That is a big minus.

We see more democracies on our planet than ever before. But as you know well, a lot of violence, starvation, and death still shape our world; and the poor always suffer the most. Not just in Somalia, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Tibet, China, Burma, and so on, but also in the United States, of course. In the United States, tax shelters for the wealthiest 20% of

Americans are still more important than medical shelter for the poorest 20% of us. Progress?

The poor in America and around the planet also pay the biggest price for drugs and for violence. The United States exports for cash and profit 3/4 of the planet's weapons. We do it largely to make a profit. Another big minus.

Are we witnessing the same old struggle between love and hate, between good and evil, between death and life? Same unceasing struggle, no progress, just new players? Well, this is important. Because you are the new players, and what you believe and do will matter to your children. It's huge.

Anyone here know who The Reverend Theodore Parker was? Theodore Parker said we are making moral progress, and he said this in 1860 when things were looking very bad for our country and for slaves in our country.

He said just before our civil war that **"the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."** Then the slaughter began for 5 years, and then President Lincoln was assassinated.

But the Reverend Parker said "have hope and be patient." However, the Reverend Parker was also an abolitionist who believed that slaves should be freed. At once. No waiting.

So he defied the law, sheltered runaway slaves in his Boston home, and helped them get to Canada. He also laid a pistol on the pulpit when he preached in order to protect the runaway slaves in his congregation, in case any slave catchers should try to capture his fugitive slaves.

Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted the Reverend Parker, during the civil rights efforts. When we could actually see the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice, at least so it seemed. Then Dr. King was assassinated 5 years later.

At that time the United States was also mired in a tangled bank of violence and death in Vietnam where hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese civilians were killed by Americans, and by the end of the violence, 50,000 American soldiers were dead.

In 1967 Bobby Kennedy took a strong stand against the war, and he became the Democratic candidate for President. Then he was assassinated, just when the arc of the moral universe looked to some like it was bending a little.

So is the Reverend Parker right about the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice? Well here is what I believe. I believe that the evidence of real moral progress is very thin, and I would not bet my hat on it.

But I know that you bring new hope, you who have worried more than most about social justice. You know that if you don't care about bending this arc you start to give up. You start to become indifferent to what is out there because, "hey it's not going to change anyway."

You become indifferent and your heart gets hardened, not just your arteries. Your arteries will start to harden in several years no matter what you do, and hardening of the arteries is bad enough I hear (ask your parents). But hardening of the heart. . .my gosh. . .that is much worse. A hard and indifferent heart quickly becomes a cynical heart. How many cynical people do you know? Quite a few I bet.

- Drug dealers are cynical people. Their hearts have hardened. They don't really care anymore.
- School dropouts have given up the good fight. In a way they are cynical: Things won't change if I stay in school. I am dropping out.
- Bullies are cynical. Big bullies like the military leaders in Burma.
- President Mugabe, of Zimbabwe is a bully
- Bullies hold others in contempt, and they mock the idea of shaping our moral universe for good.

Some of your high school teachers will be cynical. They will have given up. They will have given up believing they can help every student. They may be cynical about you before you walk in the door, before they even know you.

You are not cynical. I know you. Your hearts are not hardened, and by the way, last year's 8th graders still have soft hearts. I saw them last Friday at our Paul Cuffee School alumni bowling party where Dinka bowled at least one strike. Some of our graduates were dropping those hard bowling balls on the poor alleys, but their hearts are still soft, and they are still hopeful about our world after a year of high school. So follow them! No bowling ball hearts. You have to do 3 things.

First, stick with your schooling. Be patient, work hard, and do not drop out for any reason. Your education will give you power. Education is a power game in large part. If you complete high school and go on to finish college or a trade school, you will have power. If you've got power, you can bend the arc. If you've got no power, the arc bends you. It is that simple.

Second, you will have plenty of pain in your life. Everybody does. You already know that. Take your pain and use it to keep someone else's heart from getting hard. Right away I think of Mike Phenglee. Many of you know Mike Phenglee who is now in the 5th grade. Last year his father and sister were killed in a fire, as you may recall. Mike and his family are Buddhists, so Mike became a monk for a week following the deaths. He wore the robe of a monk, his head was shaved, and he lived with other Buddhist monks, accompanying his father safely to heaven. Then he came back to school.

Last week, a student's grandfather died. He and his family are also Buddhists, so he also became a monk in the same way, but since he is only in the first grade, his classmates did not really understand why he had shaved his head. So Mike came down and met with his class to support him and to explain some of these important practices of Buddhism. This did not bring back Mike's father or take away Mike's grief, but I know that

it helped to keep Mike's heart from hardening. I know that it bent the arc of the moral universe a little.

I understand that the Dalai Lama was conversing with a Tibetan monk who had been imprisoned by the Chinese for a long period of time, and he asked the monk what he feared most during his imprisonment. The monk said that his greatest fear was that his heart would harden and that he would lose compassion for the Chinese. In their different ways, the younger monk, Mike Phenglee, and the older Tibetan monk were both struggling to bend that arc a little

Finally. Every day that you get out of bed you must make a choice, before the sugar in those fruit loops makes you hyper. You must say, "I will bend the arc a little, some how, some way!" "I am going to run into lot of hardened and cynical people before the day ends, and I am going to read about many people who are hurting on this day."

I know that a lot of them have good reasons to be cynical about their lives. But today I am gonna choose to 'get a life', the ultimate act of courage. I am going to take the Reverend Parker's long, long arc of the moral universe and fight to bend that sucker a little,

- I am gonna respect myself and my neighbors, and my family.
- I am gonna show a little respect somewhere today.
- I am gonna care for somebody's hardening heart today.
- I am gonna put in that extra hour of homework tonight.
- I am gonna continue to object when I see someone being a bully.
- I am gonna continue to stand in the way when I see some rule or some law that hurts people.
- I am gonna get engaged.
- I am going to get a life today. Otherwise my red heart will harden, eventually hard like a bowling ball, and I will become cynical.

This morning before my fruit loops, I swear that I will not let that happen to me today. Today I am determined that I am going to make the Reverend Parker look good. I am going to bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice as only I can do it.

I think that is what Paul Cuffee did every morning before his fruit loops, and Paul Cuffee School is counting on you to stand with him, and with that Tibetan monk, and with Mike, and with each other. . .guarding your soft hearts, bending that long, long arc toward justice.

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