

REMARKS OF RONALD WELLINGTON BROWN

MAY 1, 1989

ALMOST A YEAR AGO I PREPARED AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PEOPLE OF MONTCLAIR CONCERNED WITH EDUCATION. AMONG OTHER MATTERS I PRESENTED MY VIEWS ON A NUMBER OF TOPICS AND INDICATED I WANTED TO HEAR FROM YOU. I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT I WAS STARTING, BUT HEAR FROM YOU I DID. AMONG OTHERS, I HEARD FROM LUANNE DE WOLF ON CLINTON STREET WHEN SHE JUMPED OUT OF HER CAR TO SERVE ME WITH A PETITION ABOUT CLASS SIZE. I HEARD FROM DON NICALATO IN NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE MEA. I HEARD FROM PARENTS AT NISHUANE IN SUPPORT OF THE SCHOOL BUDGET. FROM PARENTS AT EDGEMONT ABOUT MONTESSORI AND ARTS BASIC. AND FROM EVERYBODY ABOUT GROVE STREET SCHOOL. AND IT WAS GREAT! THAT'S WHAT AT LEAST HALF OF BEING ON THE BOARD OUGHT TO BE ABOUT: LISTENING TO PEOPLE, THINKING ABOUT WHAT THEY HAVE TO SAY.

I WANT TO SAY A FEW THINGS TONIGHT TO CELESTE SCANTLEBURY, TO DR. FITZGERALD, TO PARENTS AND PRINCIPALS, TO THE NEW BOARD MEMBERS AND FINALLY TO THREE SPECIAL PEOPLE.

TO CELESTE

CELESTE, AS YOU AND I LEAVE THE BOARD I WANT TO SAY THAT YOU HAVE BEEN A FINE BOARD MEMBER AND IT HAS BEEN A PLEASURE TO SERVE WITH YOU. WHEN YOU SPOKE, AS IN THE E.F. HUTTON COMMERCIAL, PEOPLE LISTENED. YOUR COUNSEL WAS ALWAYS INSIGHTFUL. YOU ALWAYS REMINDED US THAT EDUCATING CHILDREN SHOULD BE AT THE HEART OF OUR DISCUSSION, AND IN THE TEMPEST OF COMPETING CHOICES, THAT SERVED AS A STEADFAST ANCHOR FOR ALL OUR THOUGHTS. THANK YOU.

TO DR. FITZGERALD

ALMOST A YEAR AGO, IN THAT OPEN LETTER, I SPOKE ABOUT THE SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS AS THE CHIEF EDUCATIONAL OFFICER OF THE DISTRICT, AS EDUCATIONAL COUNSELOR TO THE BOARD. I SAID THEN, MARY LEE THAT I TRUSTED AND RESPECTED YOU. I SAY NOW, THAT I HAVE NEVER SEEN A PERSON WORK HARDER, AT A HIGHER LEVEL OF EFFICIENCY OR EFFECTIVENESS, OR TO BE MORE WORTHY OF TRUST AND RESPECT THAN THE SUPERINTENDENT OF THE MONTCLAIR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

I USED TO THINK THAT THE ONLY CHARACTER ASSOCIATED WITH A BIG "S" HAD A RED CAPE, BOOTIES AND WAS SEEN CHANGING IN TELEPHONE BOOTHS. BUT IN MONTCLAIR THERE'S ANOTHER PERSON WHO WEARS A BIG "S" AND IT STANDS FOR SUPER SUPERINTENDENT. AND THOUGH AT SOME TIMES ON SOME ISSUES, IT MAY SEEM THAT YOU ARE CONFRONTED WITH LOCAL LEX LUTHORS, ON BALANCE AND IN PERSPECTIVE EVEN THAT'S O.K. I COUNT AS ONE OF THE MOST VALUABLE THINGS I TAKE WITH ME AS I LEAVE THE BOARD, THE OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE WORKED WITH YOU. YOU ARE NOT PERFECT. BUT YOU ARE BETTER THAN ANY ALTERNATIVE I KNOW. AND SO IS THE STAFF AT CENTRAL OFFICE. I SHALL MISS YOU.

TO PARENTS

TO PARENTS I WOULD SAY, YOU MUST REALIZE EFFECTIVE EDUCATION IS A PARTNERSHIP RESPONSIBILITY. TEACHERS ARE NOT THE SOLE PROPRIETOR OF, AND THE SCHOOL IS NOT THE ONLY PLACE FOR THE SERIOUS BUSINESS OF EDUCATION. ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IS NOT JUST A SCHOOL PROBLEM, IT'S A HOME PROBLEM AS WELL. AS DR. DOROTHY RICH SUMMARIZED IT:

"PARENTS HAVE TO BE WILLING TO ENGAGE IN MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE WITH TEACHERS, COMING TOGETHER TO TALK ABOUT SUCH QUESTIONS AS THESE:

WHAT CAN WE REALISTICALLY EXPECT OF ONE ANOTHER? WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL TODAY? WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY? WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP EACH OTHER AND THE CHILDREN?

WE MUST, AS PARENTS, SET AN EXAMPLE FOR OUR CHILDREN. IF WE BEHAVE LIKE EDUCATION ISN'T IMPORTANT TO OUR CHILDREN, IT WON'T BE TO THEM. IF WE LIFT THEIR EYES TO THE STARS, THAT'S THE DIRECTION IN WHICH THEY WILL HEAD: UPWARD AND ONWARD. WE MUST BE SURE THAT WE SPEAK OF TRUTH, LOYALTY, LOVE, PERSEVERANCE, JUSTICE, CARING AND COMPASSION SO THAT THEY WILL LEARN THE LANGUAGE OF TRIUMPH, ACHIEVEMENT AND COMMITMENT. WE MUST SPEAK OF OUR DREAMS SO THAT THEY WILL BE ABLE TO HAVE VISIONS OF A BETTER FUTURE THAT TRANSCENDS ANY LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT.

PLATO IN BOOK II OF THE REPUBLIC SAID:

"FOR THE YOUNG ARE NOT ABLE TO DISTINGUISH WHAT IS AND WHAT IS NOT ALLEGORY, BUT WHATEVER OPINIONS ARE TAKEN INTO THE MIND AT THAT AGE ARE WANT TO PROVE INDELIBLE AND UNALTERABLE."

WHEN OUR CHILDREN SEE US, DO THEY SEE PEOPLE WHO ARE INVOLVED IN EDUCATION, WHO READ BOOKS INSTEAD OF SIMPLY WATCHING VIDEOS, WHO TALK ABOUT AND HELP TO BRING ABOUT GOOD THINGS IN THE WORLD, AND WHO WORK TO CHANGE THINGS THAT ARE NOT AS GOOD AS THEY SHOULD BE? I HOPE OUR CHILDREN FORM OPINIONS ABOUT US BASED ON OUR ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE RATHER THAN ON THE BASIS OF PASSIVE COMPLAINING ABOUT WHAT IS WRONG.

TO PRINCIPALS

I BELIEVE THE PRINCIPAL PLAYS A KEY ROLE IN THE SUCCESS OF A SCHOOL. I BELIEVE THAT PRINCIPALS, LIKE COACHES IN SPORTS, SHOULD

APPLAUD THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THOSE THEY LEAD, AND THAT PRINCIPALS SHARE THE CREDIT WITH THE TEACHERS AND STAFF FOR CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH PUPILS HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN. I HOPE THAT THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH PUPILS HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN IN MONTCLAIR WILL BE THE BEST IN THIS COUNTRY AND THAT YOU WILL MAKE IT SO.

NEW BOARD MEMBERS

IN LOOKING FORWARD, I WOULD OFFER TWO PIECES OF ADVICE TO THE NEW BOARD MEMBERS. PERHAPS REMAINING BOARD MEMBERS MAY ALSO FIND SOMETHING IN THIS ADVICE.

FIRST, I WOULD OFFER A PERSPECTIVE PROVIDED BY HENRY JAMES IN THE ART OF FICTION:

THE POWER TO GUESS THE UNSEEN FROM THE SEEN, TO TRACE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THINGS, TO JUDGE THE WHOLE PIECE BY THE PATTERN, THE CONDITION OF FEELING LIFE IN GENERAL SO COMPLETELY THAT YOU ARE WELL ON YOUR WAY TO KNOWING ANY PARTICULAR CORNER OF IT---THIS CLUSTER OF GIFTS MAY ALMOST BE SAID TO CONSTITUTE EXPERIENCE.... THEREFORE, IF I SHOULD CERTAINLY SAY TO A NOVICE, 'WRITE FROM EXPERIENCE AND EXPERIENCE ONLY', I SHOULD FEEL THAT THIS WAS RATHER A TANTALIZING MONITION IF WERE NOT CAREFUL IMMEDIATELY TO ADD, 'TRY TO BE ONE OF THE PEOPLE ON WHOM NOTHING IS LOST.'

BOARD MEMBERS WHETHER NEW OR OLD MUST TRY TO MAKE SURE THEY ARE 'ONE OF THE PEOPLE ON WHOM NOTHING IS LOST'. TWO SUGGESTIONS. FIRST, IF YOU KEEP YOUR MIND AND YOUR EARS OPEN, BE ATTENTIVE IN HEART AND SPIRIT TO THE CONCERNS, ASPIRATIONS, AND HOPES OF PARENTS, TEACHERS, STAFF, AND ESPECIALLY THE CHILDREN, YOU'LL DISCOVER THINGS OF LASTING VALUE ABOUT THEM AND ABOUT YOURSELF. SECOND, RESIST THE

OCCASIONAL TEMPTATION TO BE SAFE AND ISOLATED WITH YOUR DOUBTS, OR TO SUPPRESS THAT OCCASIONAL TROUBLED FEELING IN YOUR GUT BECAUSE YOUR FEAR YOU CAN'T ARTICULATE WHY YOU FEEL RESERVATIONS OR CONCERNS WHEN OTHERS DO NOT. IF YOU FOLLOW THESE TWO SUGGESTIONS, I BELIEVE YOU WILL BE ONE OF THOSE 'ON WHOM NOTHING IS LOST'.

WITH TONGUE GREATLY IN CHEEK AND WITH APOLOGIES TO RUDYARD KIPLING, I HAVE REVISED THE FIRST AND LAST VERSES OF ONE OF HIS POEM SO THAT IT IS NOW "IF FOR BOARD MEMBERS":

IF YOU CAN KEEP YOUR CURRICULUM HEAD
WHEN ALL ABOUT YOU ARE LOSING THEIRS AND BLAMING YOU.
IF YOU CAN TRUST YOURSELF WHEN THE PTA AND MEA DOUBT YOU
BUT MAKE ALLOWANCE FOR THEIR DOUBTING TOO:
IF YOU CAN WAIT ON WORDS FROM TRENTON
AND NOT GET CONFUSED WHEN THEY COME,
AND READ TALES ABOUT YOUR DEEDS
IN LETTERS TO THE MONTCLAIR TIMES,
BUT NEVER DEAL IN TALES
OR BELIEVE YOU COULD BE AS BAD AS YOU READ;
YET KEEP A SENSE OF HUMOR AND OCCASIONALLY LAUGH AT YOURSELF
IF YOU CAN BE PUBLICLY QUESTIONED
WITHOUT BECOMING UNDULY DEFENSIVE,
AND YET DON'T LOOK TOO GOOD, NOR TALK TOO WISE;

IF YOU CAN TALK WITH POLITICIANS AND KEEP YOUR VIRTUE,
YET WALK WITH CHILDREN, PARENTS AND TEACHERS
AND NOT LOSE THE COMMON TOUCH,
AND IF IN ALL PUBLIC MATTERS,
EVERY PERSON CAN COUNT ON YOU TO DO YOUR BEST
YOU WILL HAVE RISEN TO EVERY OCCASION AND MET THE HIGHEST TEST.
IF YOU CAN FILL THE UNFORGIVING SCHOOL BUDGET MINUTE
WITH SIXTY SECONDS OF SCHOOL FINANCE COMPREHENSION RUN
YOU'LL BE A GREAT SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER
AND WHAT IS MORE HAVE HAD SOME FUN.

IT IS MY HOPE THAT YOU WILL ENJOY AND USE TWO GIFTS GIVEN TO EACH OF US: THE GIFT OF GROWTH---WHICH IS SIMPLY THE PROCESS OF RESPONDING POSITIVELY TO CHANGE---AND THE GIFT OF IMAGINATION---WHICH IS SIMPLY SEEING HOW TO TURN POSSIBILITY INTO REALITY.

AND NOW, THREE SPECIAL PEOPLE: MY SON MICHAEL, MY DAUGHTER KIMBERLY, AND MY WIFE GERI.

MICHAEL, THIS WEEK WE WILL START PUTTING DISNEYLAND TOGETHER AGAIN. KIMBERLY, WE WILL RESUME YOUR PIANO LESSONS, AND PLAY "BACK YOU GO" AND "MONSTER". THANK YOU BOTH FOR BEING SO WONDERFUL ABOUT ALL THE MONDAY NIGHTS DADDY HAS SPENT ON THE BOARD OF EDUCATION.

TO MY BELOVED WIFE, THANK YOU FOR BEING THERE ALL THOSE NIGHTS THAT I WASN'T. RATHER THAN AN END, THIS POINT IN MY BOARD OF EDUCATION TENURE SIMPLY MARKS JUST ANOTHER NEW BEGINNING WE WILL SHARE.

I CONCLUDE WITH THIS STORY ABOUT AN OLD MAN AND ASK EVERYONE TO LISTEN TO IT WITH YOU HANDS CUPPED LIKE THIS.

HE WAS VERY WISE, AND COULD ANSWER QUESTIONS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE FOR EVERYONE ELSE TO ANSWER. SO SOME PEOPLE SAID, "WE ARE GOING TO TRICK THIS GUY TODAY. WE'RE GOING TO CATCH A BIRD, AND WE'RE GOING TO ASK HIM, "THIS THAT WE HOLD IN OUR HANDS TODAY, IS IT ALIVE OR IS IT DEAD?" "IF HE SAYS 'DEAD', WE'RE GOING TO TURN IT LOSE AND LET IT FLY. BUT IF HE SAYS, 'ALIVE', WE'RE GOING TO CRUSH IT." SO THEY WALKED UP TO THIS OLD MAN, AND THEY SAID, "THIS THAT WE HOLD IN OUR HANDS TODAY, IS IT ALIVE OR IS IT DEAD?" THE OLD MAN LOOKED AT THE PEOPLE AND HE SMILED AND SAID: "IT'S IN YOUR HANDS".

TO EACH OF YOU I SAY "THE FUTURE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN MONTCLAIR IS IN OUR HANDS AND THAT IS GOOD." THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE WORKED TOGETHER. GOD BLESS YOU AND KEEP YOU.