ST. HILDA'S COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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Excerpts from address on EDUCATIONAL ACCESS REVISITED

I am speaking today about educational access. In the States, we more commonly speak of "affirmative action" regarding admission to university, and "diversity" for the optimal composition of a student body. Studies, reports, legislation, challenges, all surround these words and programs. But "access" is a humbler and richer concept.

Introduction

I spend some weeks of the year in a small village in New Hampshire. Every day as I walk to the village store, I pass a gravestone marked "Anna B." That is all we know of her name. Beneath her name is the line summarizing her status and life: "Relict of Thomas Eaton." I would say of St. Hilda's women that we did not want the story of our lives to be described or prescribed entirely by others. We did not want to be bit players, play secondary roles, and at the end of our lives be thanked perhaps for quiet virtues, and named simply someone' else's "relict." We wanted to construct our own narrative, albeit as I now understand, in a strong tradition of women venturing forth.

Came up

I came up to St. Hilda's College as part of the first generation of students in Britain able to attend university regardless of means. The Education Act of 1944 had changed (literally) the face of education in this country. Of course, Oxford did not change so quickly. While it was less important in order to gain admission to be from a family of means, it still helped a great deal to be male. Six places were available to men for every one for a woman. For those of us who were female and from families of modest means, the sense of access was exhilarating. I was the first girl from my country school, founded in 1423, to go to Oxford; it had sent boys for generations. Unfortunately, I have no recollection of concern for all those other women not able to attend because they were only as good as the men. We women knew (and

unthinkingly accepted) that at every step our chances were slim to nil, and we pressed on.

Came down

What came next? I came down with a small band of women who had gone through the eye of the needle, supported by new attitudes and legislation, to gain admission to Oxford. Nobody read law, so there were no solicitors or aspiring barristers. Three of us were medics. None was admitted to a London hospital. My friend Dame Fiona Caldicott, who as times changed was able to demonstrate her formidable talents, was denied access to one on the basis that, "We have already admitted a woman." Some went to Cordon Bleu to prepare for proficient wifedom, some went to post-graduate programs with a view to teaching, scholarship and library work. A few years later, some diligent researcher in the States counted the number of careers portrayed in literature. She found an infinite number for men – but very few for women, and that included witch. Oh, and one of us became Lady-in-Waiting to the Queen (a profession as exotic as witch). I for one jumped on my broom and fled to the States, not because I thought opportunities would abound, but to avoid following a predictable plot line. I wanted the world to open for me, not close. And isn't that what access means for all of us?

Access programs and beyond

We think of access programs as opening doors for students. They then go through those doors. They are admitted. Now they are inside. But access so simply conceived can merely allow movement from one room to another, albeit perhaps a larger one, more fully furnished. As a concept, it is at odds with the fundamental aims of education, which are about leading out, growing, and discovering. And it is at odds with the human reality that we are all at some point on the inside, sometimes on the outside. A rich life puts us off balance from time to time, and we either retreat to the familiar or we grow and discover another dimension of our lives. This College itself has recently experienced just such a time of disequilibrium, and emerged into a new phase of its life as a college for men as well as women.

Access programs can imply that we have the goods; now we will let you share them. But we do not always recognize that these new admits (women, immigrants, students of color, students of poverty, students with English as a second language) will change the institutions they access. Not at first. The pioneers often over-perform, or go

through in a bit of a fog, and bite their tongues when they are marginalized or offended. But as the numbers swell, the ground shifts. I have come to judge the durability of an educational institution by its capacity not simply to admit and accommodate (though student and faculty diversity is certainly a sign of health); but to transform itself as it benefits from the newly accessing population.

How is access to be achieved in the current era, when as fast as we admit and provide access, the challenge grows? More students for whom English is not a native language is one major test in the States of our good intentions.

The education gap

The Education Gap is real and deeply disturbing. In the States, the divide between the educational haves and have-nots is greater than 30 years ago. Whole cities in Southern California have schools in which the students are 95-100% Hispanic, and 90-95% of them qualify for free and reduced price lunch (an indicator of poverty). Jonathan Kozol in his book The Shame of the Nation, calls it "The Restoration of Apartheid in American Education." We see a disparity in funding, in class size, in breadth and depth of offerings – and not surprisingly, therefore, a disparity in outcomes.

In America, one third of students do not graduate from high school; in the big cities 50%; in Detroit 70%.

The aim-crier

What will access look like for the next generation? Here is what I believe: Children need to see the possibilities of a greater world and they need a person who will inspire the imagination and courage to step out. A key factor in every student's determination to push through, to transcend circumstances and impediments – whether of race, class, poverty, learning style, or language - is an inspirer (in archaic terms, an aim-crier, the person who point to the target and urges the archer to success), and that inspirer is often a teacher.

Listen to these voices of students. These are directed to me, but all of us who have any kind of relationship with young people have heard something like this:

Personal relationships and voices

Kate, graduating from Wellesley College, wrote: "During my senior year I took an English class with you, in Autobiography. … We read among others Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and Kate Simon's *Bronx Primitive*. I felt incredibly inspired in your class…. In my writing I found a voice and a part of myself I had not known existed…. You gave me confidence I did not have; to think of myself as a writer. When the semester ended, on my graduation day, you came to me in the graduation line and presented me with a sequel to *Bronx Primitive*, called *A Wider World*, beautifully wrapped and with a card. And I have been writing ever since."

Here is Ann: "The fact the Head would take the time to glance at, much less talk to a student just starting at [the school] never ceased to amaze me. The day you came to announce the Head's [Advisory Council] members, you said my name and then when you were done you gave me a little smile – me specifically…. Your special smile and laugh have always made me smile… Although I could get into all the weepy stuff about coming back to visit and writing and not forgetting us, I won't. Instead, I'll just say very simply, and from all of us… that you changed us irrevocably as a school, a community, and as individuals." Ann was 12 when she wrote this.

You hear the intensely personal nature of these comments. You hear the almost magical powers and importance that are ascribed to the teacher or Principal. The students are watching. They deserve interesting and interested others in their lives, who care passionately about the development of each student, who believe you want to know what they think.

How can this simple truth contribute to narrowing the education gap?

Access re-envisioned

I have been haunted all my professional life by the disparities of access and opportunities in education. And I believe St. Hilda's women all have a connection to these issues, as women who – had we been born a generation or two earlier - would have had a much more limited education. Instead we came to St. Hilda's, where we were encouraged to believe that we had minds of value (and the women of my era kept that faith alive after we came down, even when society at large was still denying it).

Northfield Mount Hermon

I had a great opportunity to be the Head of Northfield Mount Hermon, a boarding school with vast acres spread on either side of the Connecticut River. It looked like the classic school for the offspring of wealthy families. And indeed we welcomed students from over 60 countries, and many of them came with titles and fortunes. But the school had been founded in the 19th century to give a first class education to those who could not otherwise afford it, and to that end African Americans, Native Americans, farm children and orphans from Manchester, England came to the school from its earliest days. By the time I arrived at the school, still nearly half the student body was receiving financial aid – a percentage far greater than at any other independent school. I was delighted to be at an institution that had deep in its DNA the commitment to inclusiveness, diversity, and a first class education for first generation students. And not as a class apart, but as students who would gain by learning alongside those who had grown up with greater means and privilege. Indeed, everyone gained in that extraordinarily diverse environment.

Then I spent a decade living in **New Orleans**, where my sense of the educational divide grew apace.

The public (i.e. state) school population of the city of New Orleans is 95% African American, and 85% live in poverty. The school buildings had been allowed to deteriorate to an alarming degree, supplies were few, and anyone who could scrape together tuition chose an independent or Catholic school. And then came Hurricane Katrina. My husband and I evacuated at the last moment before the hurricane, and our home flooded and the independent school he headed also succumbed. We regrouped in Dallas and called on our independent school networks in that city and around the country to admit his students and lend resources to enable his school and others to reopen in record time. But to our horror, we saw that the city of New Orleans had declared its public schools closed for the year. Now we saw the most extreme manifestation of the education gap: not between good schools and poor schools, but between good schools and NO schools.

Wingspan Partnerships

We resolved to launch a non-profit foundation to develop partnerships between independent schools and public schools, leveraging the resources of independent schools and creating authentic partnerships between the two kinds of schools. We had

seen that private schools could throw out a lifeline when the floods came; the waters are rising in many American cities, and linking these schools is one way to ensure that the most under-served public schools do not float out of reach of mainstream education in America.

In the re-segregated world, whole institutions need to connect.

The Northfield Mount Hermon model is vital; the access programs that abound in the States are critical (called Prep for Prep, Upward Bound, Making Waves, Stepping Stones, and so on…) as are those in Britain, all identifying students of promise and preparing them for demanding and selective institutions.

What Wingspan Partnerships, our organization, promotes is the linking of whole institutions, faculty, and students - not in a spirit of *noblesse oblige*, not to unload old books from the library or provide gifts at Christmas – but in an engagement that shifts their cultures to the benefit of all involved. In Orange Country, for example, we have worked with Sage Hill, an independent school in the wealthy community of Newport Beach, to develop links with several elementary schools in nearby underserved areas. In one of them, 16 year olds provide an ongoing English literacy program for 8 year olds whose native language is Spanish. At the end of the first year of the program we met with the public school principal to review the outcome of the program. She showed us the literacy improvement. And then she astonished us. She said, this is great, but it is not the point. The experience that my kids have with the Sage Hill students is the best experience they have all year. They wait to see them, they look up to them – and now they are all talking about going to college. You see the aim criers in action. They are only 16 years old, but they are prepared and thoughtful in their teaching, and they are tremendously influential with 8 year olds, and genuinely mitigate the problems of large classes and lack of practice in conversational English.

In the big and difficult cities like Baltimore, Philadelphia and Cleveland, we see steady development of relationships between independent and public schools - increasingly in citywide consortia, which allows for even greater mutual support and resource development.

The Charity Commission in the UK has required the independent schools here to develop plans that demonstrate the schools' contribution to the public good – the

"public benefit requirement," and some English educators are developing Wingspan-style partnerships.

Coming full circle

I had the opportunity to be admitted to Oxford; it afforded me a wider world – and at the same time I chafed at its narrowness, certainties and strictures. I took with me a longing to push out, to be in situations less known and prescribing. I also knew that I had been in a place of uncompromising excellence, and that standard stayed with me. And over time called me to do what I could to open this kind of experience to others. At Northfield Mount Hermon, I lived with students for 16 years, and knew one by one the ways that access can transform a life. But by the time Hurricane Katrina tore through my life, I was ready to imagine a new phase of access. One in which we do not invite and orient and acculturate the underserved student into our institution, but in which whole institutions have the openness and humility to engage and the faculty and students learn from each other and together.

St. Hilda's history and mission are about access and equity. Its extraordinary history and strengths and experience position it to understand the needs of the newly accessing, whether from overseas or poverty, AND to have the vision and flexibility to transcend the old definitions, to avoid the constrictions of inside-outside and offer a truly dynamic 21st century education. The College is an exemplar, with its history of intellectual excellence AND access. St. Hilda's College itself has lived the history of the outsider, kept on the margins; it has the earned and deep capacity not only to admit, but to transform and lead.