

Talk by Jessica Howard

at The Hiland Hall Graduation June 7, 2024

It's good to be here again – 'again' being the operative word. Graduation is a marker event for lots of us in different ways: for you sitting in front of me, the start of summer vacation – hurray! For your teachers, time to draw a long breath and start writing and evaluating. For you the end actually of childhood, for others of you out there a poignant moment in your life with your child. For me, graduation marks one more year of doing the good work, and truthfully I'm not sure how many more years I'll be doing this... so, it really is good to stand here again, and have one more year to look back on.

Sometimes when I speak to you at this time I mention a person named John Dewey – a great philosopher of education, freedom, and democracy, and a citizen of the United States, and indeed a Vermonter. And relatively modern – He and I overlap, in fact; he died when I was 10.

But today I want to tell you about a different philosopher, another thinker and educator, someone you probably never heard of before, even though he invented an idea, and a word for his idea, that you all know: kindergarten. His name is Frederich Froebel, he lived far away in Germany a long time ago, more or less when this country was just getting started. He invented the idea of Kindergarten, and named it that: a garden of children, or for children. He was writing in the early 1820's, and came up with the idea of kindergarten I think in the 1840's – a special place for children who are not yet old enough for "school" (which didn't start until age 7 in Germany in those days) but who he thought could use a place beyond the family to develop various skills, including social skills. I read parts of his book a lot 50 years ago, and learned a great deal from him, but haven't read him since until now. I came back to him because when South Group was picking vocabulary words to explore from their readers, Hadley was reading Ramona The Pest (remember Ramona?) and she wanted to know what "kindergarten" meant.

So I started reading Froebel again, and decided to make him the focus of a little gathering I do every year in honor of my friend (and your friend too really) Pat Carini.

Froebel has a lot to say about the importance of play and how serious it really is – he was among the very first to take children's play seriously as real work and real exploration and invention and creation. But, this time as I was reading him, a different idea caught my attention: when he was writing about the school years, not early childhood, he said that it was the business of the school to strengthen the will of the student.

What?

The curriculum, he said, was to lead the student through the exploration of the outer world (that makes sense) and the purpose was to strengthen a student's will. I confess I am not used to thinking of my work in quite those terms.

But, when someone I respect says something I don't quite understand, I try to think about it and work on it. So, I thought, what does Froebel mean when he uses the word "will", and why does a human being need to be helped to strengthen their will – it seems to me that some of us already have plenty of will.

We use the word 'will' a lot – what might he mean and does it really reflect our goals as teachers?

Well, we say someone is willing - meaning agreeable to do things they are asked to do. Or, you can say someone is wilful – that is, always determined to have their own way – but that seem more like “I won’t” rather than “I will.” That can be important too, saying “I wont” in the right place (I’m thinking about Rosa Parks, for instance,) and probably has to do with our species longing for ‘Freedom.’ But longing for freedom is not the same as saying “I will.” To me that suggests someone who has made a commitment, and has a pretty good idea that they can carry it out. There’s also the idea of ‘good-will’ and the Will that Seniors sometimes leave us about their bank accounts...but when I say “I will” I mean that I will carry out some purpose or project. I have made a commitment, one that I have confidence I can carry out.

Part of being human is to be distractible – to be looking around, to be interested in the next new thing. This is part of our evolutionary heritage for survival – to be looking for the next choice we have to make, the possible tool or material we might need. This idea links in my mind to our need and impulse to have freedom – to live our lives as we would choose. Remember, we have to invent in order to survive – we are not born knowing how to build a nest, or what food is healthy for us.

*We are the ones who choose –that is our destiny and our doom - and thus, we are also the ones who need to learn to have will – not the kind of will that over-rides everyone else – though that can be learned too – but the kind of will that allows us to follow through when we have once made a choice or decision. Once the choice is made, then we do indeed need something I call focus or purpose. We do indeed need to discipline ourselves to not respond to the next new thing, the next joke, the next interesting noise or color, or even the friend who is walking by.*

So that is now making sense to me – yes, much of what we do around your studies, which are in fact of the external world, is designed to help you relate your inner life to your life choices, to give purpose to your work, and to provide you with the possibility of developing focus and purpose and responsibility. In effect, To have will. Think about the times we ask you to make choices or identify your connection to something: activity time (which Froebel would see as you expressing your inner being as a form of play, while developing various skills); think about your Independent Studies – we always ask you to say why you choose that topic – what about it reflects something important in your inner self. But we do the same thing even in a simple reader reflection; In what way did your reader speak to you – what did you like, and why? Always the why. Think about when Quena asks you to make a wise seating choice. She means she hopes you know yourself well enough to choose to be somewhere where you can focus – where you can do the task at hand with purpose. To strengthen your will to carry out the job.

It turns out, that Froebel was right – giving you the tools you need to carry out your purposes in life, in a certain way, means helping you to have what he calls “ a strong and pure will.” We might call it good work habits, but always coupled with inner purpose. I want to stress that. To be truly in service of a purposeful life good work habits must be allied with inner awareness and meaning. Otherwise they are just in the service of servitude to someone else.

So – are you ready? Have you in fact developed focus and inner purpose and responsibility? Can you set your purpose and carry it out more or less with out an adult’s guidance, knowing where to get help and where you can carry on by yourself?

Yes – you have and can.. Each of you, with all your different interests and personalities and styles, to begin with, with different capacities in so many ways, and with different gaps and needs, have each

demonstrated in small ways and big that you can bring purpose and focus to a project, that you can resist the distractions (sometimes, anyway) and can get the work done. Whatever it is or will be.

Is one ever actually done learning to apply one's will? I suppose someone somewhere has mastered themselves sufficiently to say yes – I have not. The work of bringing focus and determination – that is will power – to ones projects and life seems to me to be ongoing – at least I'm still working on it. Our human tendency to be distractible – and to say "I wont" rather than "I will", persists. But you at least are on the road, you know what it feels like to accomplish a purpose, you have accomplishments to point to - so off you go. Don't really need those training wheels anymore...much.

Ahead is exciting, and new, and bigger – sometimes though you might want to turn around and look back. And when you do what you will see are the smiling faces of those who love you, have confidence in you, to whom you will always be dear and precious.