

The Literary Club

Cincinnati, Ohio

May 2, 2011

CHOICE

Ladies and Gentlemen, Oh, Wrong venue. There are no ladies here. In fact in 160 plus years, there have never been ladies here. Not that there's anything wrong with that. Just because that's the way it's been for 160 years, why should we rush into anything new or different? And far be it from me to advocate any change, nothing so rash as that. We have, the 100 members, and the fifty plus assembled here tonight, chosen to follow the choice of those founders over 160 years ago, with precious little change. True there has been some tinkering at the edges, the location has changed—2 or 3 times—, and the time we meet, and reportedly rowdiness has become subdued, but we have pretty much left things as they originally were, reminding me of the words of the father of our similarly named secretary, who when asked at an annual meeting of the Cincinnati Country Club by one brave lady why the mens' locker room was so much nicer than the ladies' locker room, replied, "Well, I guess it's because that's the way the men want it." (Parenthetically, the ladies locker room is now much nicer than the mens.)

But The Literary Club in its present form suits us members just fine, and it is our choice to keep it the way we do. It works for us.

For others the choice to follow what has always been the way of doing things, is not the choice they make. They need to do things in a different fashion, for their own reason, or because the continuation of doing the same old thing strikes them as wrong and they choose a different course.

Tonight I intend to introduce a lady who made that different choice. She, I am confident you will agree, is quite remarkable, and her story and accomplishments are even more remarkable. Her name is Wendy Kopp, and parenthetically like one of my own daughters, a graduate of Princeton University, so I probably have already perked up the ears of those of my fellow Literarians with an unnatural predilection for Halloween colors. But unlike my Princetonian, Wendy took a germ of an idea, her own sense of where she was, what she had come from, what her experiences were and set about to change the world, and she has.

Wendy's experience was much like that of many of her Princeton class mates. Wendy came from Dallas and attended public schools in an upper middle class community with 300 to 400 others in her class, very much like her socioeconomically and racially, over 99 per cent of whom would graduate, and over 97 per cent of those would go on to college. Once she got to Princeton, Wendy realized that she had been well prepared for the rigors of that institution by the high quality of the schools she had been able to attend and the support provided by her community and the family life she had been privileged to enjoy.

Perhaps one would not first think of Princeton as a place that the inequities of American education would come bubbling to the surface, nor of deep concerns for those left behind in the education race. After all as U.S. News and World Report reminds us every fall, if Princeton isn't the very top ranked university in the country, it is either tied for number one, or within a disgruntled vote or two of that position. But what Wendy saw first hand was a more diverse student body than had been her high school classmates. At Princeton every student had remarkable accomplishments. But even within that universe, there were some broad distinctions and differences. Wendy's competitive urban high school had prepared her well (think Walnut Hills on a local scale), but those classmates who had attended eastern prep schools were in an

altogether different category, which she referred to as the “cake walk”. There were assuredly others whose preparatory education required them to become virtual library slaves to get by. So even within this select group of achievers, the differences were apparent to Wendy, and those differences piqued Wendy’s sensibilities and concerns of right and wrong. Yet this was the most selective university in the country, and these were basically distinctions without a difference in the realm of education on a national basis.

In that world, far away in terms of opportunity, yet right next door to every classmate of Wendy’s at Princeton, was a public school system that was failing a large number of those it was to serve, and of those who relied upon it and those who paid for it. If it had been a business, it would have been forced into bankruptcy many times over, both voluntary and involuntary, but who was looking. It was hiding in plain sight so close you could touch it if you would only look and see what was all about you. To Wendy this circumstance was just plain not fair. And during her years at Princeton the situation kept gnawing at her, irritating her conscience.

Let’s look at what the inequitable state of American preparatory education was at this time:

By the time they reach fourth grade, children from low-income communities are two to three years behind their higher income peers.

Barely half of low income students will graduate high school by age 18, and those who do graduate will be performing at an eighth grade level.

Only one in ten students growing up in a low income community will graduate from college.

A McKinsey & Company study indicates that educational inequity costs the country \$500 billion annually.

The societal loss is reflected in limited life choices, professional options and incomes. Because children of color predominate at least in urban low income districts, they will also face the added burden of racial discrimination.

How could where you were born be so determinative of your entire life? Why should there be such inequities in America? Could anything be done about this situation, and what might those things be, and who might be the ones to be doing something about it? These were the thoughts germinating inside Wendy. Among her interests at Princeton was an organization that brought students and business leaders to Princeton to discuss and learn about pressing social issues and to formulate action plans. In Wendy's senior year she chaired this group and directed its efforts toward improvements in our education system at the annual conference. In addition to her developing awareness of the seemingly insoluble problems with American education that were weighing on her mind, if you think about it, education basically formed the extent of her experiences to that point, so it is no wonder that her interest developed in this area.

At that conference were students from colleges all over the country, and they were obviously committed, intelligent leaders. The business leaders were obviously of the same make up. What Wendy felt and was developed in those discussions was that teacher quality was the touchstone to a student's education and the single most important factor in a student's chance at an education, which in turn was the key to that student's success in life. There were of course many factors, family heritage, community support, lack of worry, sufficient nourishment, the whole gamut, but remove or insert superb teaching, and the results were effected in ways nothing else could touch.

What was quality teaching and what went into it? Well commitment, enthusiasm, intelligence, desire, all the usual –or unusual–characteristics of success and competence. It was

not rocket science as they say, or was it, and if it wasn't, then why was our public education system failing its customers? Students in America were falling behind in comparative studies with those in other countries, both in numbers of graduates and the quality of those educations. The world was becoming more educated and in America large numbers of our students were not keeping up. And once they didn't keep up, they didn't just stay in place, they fell behind and could never catchup.

While our universities were still upholding world class standards, how could there exist such a widespread fall off in the first twelve school years? Wendy knew she wanted to do something about this situation, and she knew that many of those in her classes at Princeton felt the same way, and certainly those who attended her conferences felt that way. In fact in exploring the problems in American education, several students had off-handedly opined that they would teach for a year or two in problem areas if they could get a job and be allowed to teach (without having to go to teachers college). It was no secret that the most competitive students did not attend teachers colleges, nor that teaching was not the choice of the top students. What further came out from the discussions was that those rural and inner-city failing school districts could not entice the teacher college educated teachers to go into those schools, nor could those districts force their teachers best able to help the neediest children to teach in those schools.

To these thoughts Wendy added her own that if there were a national teacher corps (like the Peace Corps) composed of top graduates from the first rate colleges, who committed to a couple of years of teaching in the problem urban and rural areas, a lot could be accomplished. Wendy's thoughts found a reception among the students at her conference, with many asking where they could sign up. There was of course, no place to sign up, in fact there was no such

thing as a national teacher corps, nor any thing else in place for such an organization. Yet Wendy was hooked.

She thought about all that she had heard and all of her experiences. She thought about the effect on those children being left behind in the current situation. She thought about the willingness of those just like her to commit themselves to teaching in the problem school districts and the intelligence, enthusiasm, energy and commitment they would bring to those schools and those children, about how a good apple in the barrel could raise the level of the rest in the school. And she thought about how she would attract those students to that commitment. It was the same way she had been attracted to Princeton. Make it high quality and exclusive, make it hard to get in, appeal to the better nature and altruism of the target group. There were plenty of students just like her who were tired of the disparaging “me” generation characterizations, who just needed the right opportunity and who would jump at the chance to help others, to give back to the community that had offered them so much, and spurn Wall Street, at least for a couple of years, and who knows, maybe make a career of it, or perhaps become permanent advocates for community service or involved education supporters. Wendy just knew this could work. It was not an impossible situation, or an impossible dream, and Wendy dreamed big. She knew this had to be a national endeavor, not just a school or single district in order to succeed and to be meaningful.

In the meantime Wendy did need to be able to support herself come the next fall at the latest, and so she thought about becoming a teacher herself and her inquiries were of very limited success. Unsure if she had to have a teaching degree to teach, she called the New York City public school system and was informed that since she was lacking a teacher’s degree or certificate, she might be able to get a job, but would have to wait until after Labor Day to see

who didn't show up or quit immediately, to ascertain how many openings there might be and if she would be offered a position. Wendy did not think this response would be satisfactory to her parents back in Dallas, nor was it anything other than discouraging to her.

Perhaps out of necessity to some extent (and definitely exuberant naivete), but also convinced of the soundness of her concept, she decided to take the bull by the horns and write a letter to President George H. W. Bush directly, encouraging him to think of John Kennedy's Peace Corps, and create a national teacher corps. Her impassioned letter did draw a response. Unfortunately it was a form letter denying her application for a job. I guess that vision thing was always a problem for Old 41.

Still needing a job, Wendy half-heartedly sent out five applications, one for an investment bank, two to consulting firms, a real estate venture, and a business; but at the same time and not to be overlooked was that distinguishing event in the life of a Princeton student in her senior year, "The Thesis". With her response from President Bush in mind, and the very apparent fact that the government was not going to start a teacher corps, maybe she could start one herself through the creation of a non-profit organization. After all as head of that Princeton student organization, she had in fact managed a staff of sixty, raised several hundred thousand dollars through magazine advertising and conference sponsorships and what she later came to understand was her most important experience, the fact that she didn't have the experience to see any flaws in her thinking or know why she couldn't succeed. So why not write her thesis on her creation of a non-profit organization to create a national teacher corps. As her thesis came into being over her senior year, her half-hearted job seeking also bore the expected fruit. She went 5 for 5, the last rejection from Morgan Stanley, and the die was cast. She had to finish her thesis to graduate, and she had no job offers, so what else could be done, than to create her own job as

outlined in her thesis.

Her advisor was supportive and also suggested his approval was conditioned upon her thesis being something beyond a plea for more teachers. The week before the thesis was due in April 1989, Wendy turned in her draft and awaited word from her professor which prompted his summoning her to his office two days later. Despite her fears that her thesis would not be sufficient and her professor would reject it, her professor's only critique was "How in the world are you ever going to raise \$2.5 million?" That issue had already been resolved in her mind. Wendy replied that Ross Perot lived in her home town of Dallas and was really into education, so it should be no problem. With that full display of exuberance, naivete and inexperience, Wendy turned in her thesis, and set about creating her job.

The Princeton Library provided names and addresses of major U.S. corporate chief executive officers of thirty or so companies including Mobile Oil, Delta Airlines, Coca-Cola, Xerox, IBM, A T& T, and yes, Ross Perot. Although no CEO's talked to her, she did get interviews down the chain of command and Union Carbide called her to a meeting, and offered free office space in one of their Manhattan buildings. A Mobile Oil vice president met with her and she was provided a \$26,000 seed grant plus the suggestion that she get her idea incorporated, and that Princeton had plenty of attorneys, one of whom might be interested in accomplishing that little task, and also receive her funds and pass them on to her. Lo and behold, a call to her thesis advisor and follow up to the office of Princeton's counsel and that also happened. Wendy was on her way.

Now let's stop at this juncture and inspect the situation. I hazard that the august group assembled here tonight thinks this a fairy tale at this point. How many doctors, lawyers and even Indian chiefs here tonight would make the choice Wendy did? We all graduated from college,

probably a further degree or two, followed by internships and off we went to a place of business, where all was taken care of. We were given work to do and told more or less how to do it. We had customers and their work supplied to us. We had a template for what was supposed to be done and when. And then we got paid for performing. We answered phones on desks and had assistants or operating rooms or x-ray machines or anything else that was needed. That was our choice. Wendy's choice was entirely different.

Now she had some money and some place to work from. She had her thesis as a guide. But she needed all the rest. She gathered 4 or 5 like minded Ivy Leaguers to her cause, and they began the process of creating Teach for America. The first step was to gather the producers, the members of the Teach for America corps, those willing to teach. At the same time she had to gather the commitments from the needy school districts to place the teachers in. She had to continue to attract donations and grants to operate the entire system. They had to create a management system to oversee the project, and a training capacity to assure those new teachers knew what they were going to be doing, and kept on knowing what to do.

Wendy freely admits that had she realized what had to be done beforehand, it would never have gotten done. Teach for America would have remained only a forgotten thesis in the Princeton Library along with all those other musings of all those other Tigers.

Instead with all that exuberant inexperience driving her vision, she prevailed. She contacted superintendents in school districts with failing schools and ultimately ended up with six school districts in low income areas, rural and urban, that were willing to employ her corps men and women. Typical of the response was the personnel director of the Los Angeles Unified School District, who said he could never get Ivy League graduates to teach in his school district, and he would take as many as Wendy could supply. And so it went.

Requests for grants and donations did reach at least some sympathetic ears and ironically the CEO of Morgan Stanley agreed to a meeting and then agreed to supply sufficient office space for Wendy and her entire staff, including all utilities, phone service and the Morgan Stanley print room for free, when six months before that company had turned her down for a job and set her on this course. The estimated value of this arrangement was \$500,000 a year. Several years later that CEO would commend Teach for America and tell Wendy he hoped his own daughter would be accepted as one of her teachers.

After several entreaties, and calls from other CEOs that Wendy had contacted, she received a phone call out of the blue from Ross Perot himself agreeing to a meeting, and she was in his office two days later. Perhaps just because she wouldn't bite on Mr. Perot's suggestion that Wendy call his good friend Sam Walton (and leave him alone) and kept insisting he was the key to her venture and she kept ignoring his suggestions that the meeting was over and she wouldn't budge, he relented and promised \$500,000 if she could match it three times. He also agreed to make contacts for her. This pledge in hand, the necessary match amounts were able to be raised and the plan outlined in her thesis began to become reality. Her team now numbered 6, and campus representatives and prospective teachers were found. American Express through the offices of another contact issued a \$70,000 line of credit and 200 campus representatives were brought together at Princeton, which Wendy had talked into agreeing to sponsor the meeting. The success of that meeting translated into students willing to commit and recruiting on various campuses commenced. The Yale rep slipped flyers and brochures under the doors of all seniors a few days before Christmas break and his answering machine had gotten 170 responses within 3 days. The rep from Carlton College said 100 of the 450 seniors had showed up at a scheduled information session. That first class had 2,500 applicants for a teaching position and 500 were

selected, this from an already winnowed select student body for each of the colleges involved. Talk about a selection process!

That first class had to be brought together for training and assignment, a teachers college for the corps. The University of Southern California campus provided the venue and the first 500 gathered there, and were trained before being sent out to their new jobs. The school districts had been obtained. The headquarters staff had increased to handle the job of culling and selecting the teachers, all of which applicants were very probably qualified. A location for, and staff, and a program to instruct the new teachers what they were about was created, and the training was accomplished and the first class sent out to the schools. Thereafter the teachers were contacted on a regular basis and kept up to date with seminars and further training and supervision, and of course the task of creating and paying for the next year's class was begun, or never really ceased. Who among us here tonight would have commenced this journey?

Not that all was success and happiness. There were conflicts with the various aspects of the mission for Teach for America, at least one unfavorable magazine article, some confusion and unhappiness with different aspects of the process. And of course the nerve-racking, nail-biting need to meet payroll, with ever increasing expenses and getting-hit-too-often donors or grant providers. This led to increasing the mission of Teach for America beyond providing teachers in needy schools, as many grants were for start-up endeavors, not continuing an up and running venture. There were issues with the scope of Teach for America and other core issues that Wendy refused to allow to get past the discussion stage. She let the talk continue and then set about her fund raising efforts and somehow made it through the next pay roll. The creation of other entities within Teach for America ultimately proved too much and within five years the other entities were spun off, and Teach for America returned to its initial goals.

At this five year mark there were a thousand teacher corps members in 15 districts and Wendy could no longer physically tolerate the semimonthly emergencies with the venture hanging in the balance. A better funding method was essential, and only an endowment would provide that. There was now a five year track record, an experienced staff in place, and with the help of several large matching grants, the endowment came into being, and with a \$1,000,000 grant supplied by the federal government through AmeriCorps, for the first time Teach for America ended the year with a surplus.

Teach for America was supplying teachers whose enthusiasm and competence, willingness to work long hours, to provide coaching or extra-curricular training and supervision, was benefitting not only those students in the classes, but also infected the whole teaching staffs with these same traits. Teach for America was making amazing differences, and becoming well known for those results. Schools were progressing from the lowest performance to the top performance under Teach for America corpsmen. Alumni of the program kept in touch and attended annual reunions. They established their own schools. They became leaders in government and business and usually maintained their interest in education. And of course many made teaching their profession.

Typically 90 to 95 percent of those who signed up for a two year commitment, fulfilled that obligation. By 2000 there were 1500 corpsmen placed in 15 districts, and five years later there were 3,500 corpsmen selected from 17,000 applicants and placed in 22 districts, and Teach for American was the top employer for many college's graduating classes.

In 2008, President Bush 43, signed a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act which initially provided \$20 million for Teach for America with increasing amounts for the next 6 years, and total fund raising reached \$100 million, with 6,200 teachers placed in 29 locations.

For the current year there are 8,200 Teach for America corpsmen in 39 locations and there are 20,000 alumni. This past week John Kasich signed into law a bill authorizing Teach for America instructors in Ohio schools for the coming year. More than 500,000 students annually now come into contact with teach for America teachers and more that 3 million students have benefitted from those teachers since it began.

This is the legacy of Wendy's choice, and isn't the country the better for it!

Respectfully submitted,

Ernest Eynon

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