Booker T. Washington’s Educational Contributions to Contemporary Practices of Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This article discusses Booker T. Washington’s educational contributions to contemporary practices of sustainable development. In particular, the article looks at Washington’s contributions in the areas of economic sustainability and entrepreneurship, character development, and aesthetics. As states continue to contemplate and evaluate the value of an economy based on principles of sustainable development, Washington’s education of the hands, the head, and the heart will probably become increasingly significant. A look at how such education was perceived and practiced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is therefore invaluable.

Keywords: community education, critical pedagogy, critical theory, development education, education policy, philosophy of education

Introduction

In 1901, the autobiography of, Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (1901/2000), was published. In that work, Washington discussed his life as a child born into slavery and the ensuing development of life as a free man who founded and became president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. As President of Tuskegee Institute, Washington implemented a form of industrial education that focused on three areas—the hands, the head, and the heart. Every student at Tuskegee was expected to learn some practical skill. This was an education of the hands. Every student was expected to be able to think for him or herself. ‘I wish to give you an education that will enable you to construct rules in grammar and arithmetic for yourselves,’ wrote Washington. ‘That is the highest kind of training’ (Washington, 1903/2008, pp. 50–51). And lastly, every student was expected to leave Tuskegee with an impeccable sense of moral character. This was an education of the heart (Washington, 1901/2000, p. 203).
Today, the legacy of Washington’s educational philosophy can be seen in schools such as Northfield Mount Hermon (NMH) in Massachusetts. The NMH school is a ‘selective, independent, co-educational, non-denominational, college-preparatory boarding and day school for students in grades 9–12 and postgraduates.’ The school is located on the banks of the Connecticut River in Mount Hermon adjacent to the town of Gill, Massachusetts. As of 2014, the motto at Northfield is ‘education for the head, heart, and hand.’ The school offers a ‘balanced and multidimensional learning and living experience, resulting in a purposeful education that prepares students for our 21st-century world.’ The curriculum at NMH reflects a ‘communal sense of moral duty and concerned citizenship’ (Stone, 2009, p. 98). ‘All of it – the head, the heart, and the hands; the inclusivity; the WorkJob program –’ writes one faculty member, ‘is part of a global perspective and a values system that includes our environment as well as social justice and economic sustainability’ (Stone, 2009, p. 98).

Today, an education of the hands, head, and heart has influenced such practices of education known as ‘holistic education,’ ‘eco-education,’ ‘schooling for sustainability,’ ‘farm to school programs,’ ‘project-based learning,’ ‘education for sustainable development,’ ‘ecological literacy,’ and ‘green education.’ A constantly evolving and dynamic process, education of the hands, the head, and the heart takes place in schools that use the ‘woods outside their classrooms as playgrounds and laboratories; on campuses set on inner city asphalt lots; and in schools dropped into the middle of suburban housing tracts’ (Stone, 2009, p. 13).

This article discusses, Booker T. Washington’s educational contributions to contemporary practices of sustainable development. In particular, the article looks at Washington’s contributions in the areas of economic sustainability and entrepreneurship, character development, and aesthetics. As states continue to contemplate and evaluate the value of an economy based on principles of sustainable development, Washington’s education of the hands, the head, and the heart will probably become increasingly significant. A look at how such education was perceived and practiced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is therefore invaluable.

**Washington on Economic Sustainability and Entrepreneurship**

In 1907, *The Negro in Business*, was published. In that book, Washington provided an account of the achievements of successful black business men and women throughout the country. Washington argued that business and industry constituted ‘strategic points’ in solving the race problem. ‘These fundamental professions we are able to occupy,’ he wrote, ‘not only without resistance but even with encouragement, and from them we shall gradually advance to all the rights and privileges which any class of citizens enjoy’ (Washington, 1907a, p. 8).

It was in business and industry, and specifically, in entrepreneurship, where Washington saw the most hope in dealing with race issues. With this book in particular—*The Negro in Business*—he sought to document efforts of those in the Black community who had begun to solve their own problems and improve the conditions of the Black community through entrepreneurial activities:
The struggle of the black man in this country is everywhere much the same. He must go out, as it were, and dig out of nothing—something. He must close his eyes to opposition and let work and perseverance be the key-note of his ambition. The success that is built from the ground with one’s own hand is lasting and sacred, but things thrown upon us generally go as they come. All of us must work without ceasing along our chosen lines, for that is the only key that will unlock the door of opportunity. (Washington, 1907a, p. 136)

This struggle—the ability to build out of nothing something—was to Washington, the basis of all real progress, moral or material, and required the development of two things: ‘habits of system’ and ‘fidelity in the small details of life’ (Washington, 1907a, p. 137). The development of these habits, Washington argued, would result in practices of self-reliance and feelings of self-respect that would not only benefit the Black community, but the White community as well:

The minute it was seen that through industrial education the Negro youth was not only studying chemistry, but also how to apply the knowledge of chemistry to the enrichment of the soil, or to cooking, or to dairying, and that the student was being taught not only geometry and physics, but their application to blacksmithing, brickmaking, farming, and what not, then there began to appear for the first time a common bond between the two races and co-operation between the North and South. (Washington, 1907a, p. 166)

The one man to whom Washington looked as an exemplar—one who was able to make something out of nothing through the development of ‘habits of system’ and ‘fidelity in the small details of life’—was, George Washington Carver, one of the instructors in agriculture at Tuskegee Institute. In The Negro in Business, Washington, recalled an instance when one of the land-holders in Montgomery County, Alabama, asked, Carver, to accompany him on his farm for the purpose of inspecting it. At the farm, Carver, discovered traces of what he thought was a valuable mineral deposit used in making a certain kind of paint:

The interest of the landowner and the agricultural instructor at once became mutual. Specimens of the deposits were taken to the laboratories of the Tuskegee Institute and analyzed by Mr. Carver. In due time, the land-owner received a report of the analysis, together with a statement showing the commercial value and application of the mineral. (Washington, 1907a, p. 167)

‘I shall not go through the whole interesting story,’ wrote Washington, ‘except to say that a stock company, composed of some of the best white people in Alabama, has been organized and is now preparing to build a factory for the purpose of putting their product on the market’ (Washington, 1907a, p. 167). It was this practice of ‘fidelity in the small details of life’ that, Washington, sought to teach students through industrial education. To, Washington, it was not the study of chemistry alone that was important, but the practical application of the study of chemistry to everyday needs.

Because industrial education was favored by Southern Whites, the perception among Southern Blacks was that it must be against the interests of the Black community. Washington was aware of that perception. He knew that opposition to industrial education
was based on a fear that it would mean the abandonment of all political privileges and the end of higher or classical education among members of the Black race. Washington thought that such opposition was largely based on a fear ‘that the final outcome would be the “materialization” of the Negro and the smothering of his spiritual and aesthetic nature’; he was also aware that there was the fear that industrial education had as ‘its object the limitation of the Negro’s development, and the branding him for all time as a special hand-working class’ (Washington, 1907a, p. 171).

Washington believed, however, that those who opposed industrial education would eventually come to see that black students who became skilled in agriculture and who became successful farmers were laying the foundation for future generations of Blacks to pass through a ‘purely literary college’ if desirable:

> Industrial education in this generation is contributing in the highest degree to make what is called higher education a success. It is now realized that in so far as the race has intelligent and skillful producers, the greater will be the success of the minister, lawyer, doctor, and teacher. Opposition has melted away, too, because all men now see that it will take a long time to ‘materialize’ a race, millions of which hold neither houses nor railroads, nor bank stock, nor factories, nor coal and gold mines. (Washington, 1907a, p. 172)

To, Washington, emancipation required that one not only gain economic independence, but also ‘act on his own initiative, and do things new and different’ (Washington, 1907a, p. 7). There was thus a creative element that had to be fulfilled. In Washington’s view, the purpose of education was to teach principles that would lead to economic independence and to the happiness and wellbeing of the whole community. He sought to achieve this through industrial education that focused on the hands, the head, and the heart:

> Every black youth that is given this training of hand and strength and mind so that he is able to grasp the full meaning and responsibility of the meaning of life, so that he can go into some forest and turn the raw material into wagons and buggies, becomes a citizen who is able to add to the wealth of the state and to bear his share of the expenses of educational government. (Washington, 1907a, p. 162)

Today, an education of the hands, the head, and the heart takes place in schools all over the world. It takes place in schools that use gardens to create innovative lunch programs, in schools with brand new state of the art facilities, in schools located in aging buildings, and in schools with no lunch service programs at all. The curriculum, as shown in some of, Michael Stone’s case studies, ‘lays a foundation for responsible, active citizenship’ (Stone, 2009, p. 13). Farm to school programs provide examples that show how this is taking place in schools across the country. ‘Farm to school programs,’ writes Stone, ‘exemplify solutions that beget other solutions’ (p. 10).

In Tallahassee, Florida, for instance, the New North Florida Cooperative initiated by small-scale black farmers provides income to farmers and delivers fresh produce to over a million students in more than 70 districts in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas (Stone, 2009, p. 38). When the New North Florida Cooperative began,
its area in the Florida panhandle was economically depressed, with high unemployment and struggling farms (Stone, 2009, p. 38). The project began when Gadsden County School District four Director, J'Amy Peterson, exercised ‘fidelity in the small details of life.’ As a way to support local farmers, she decided to introduce fresh local produce into school meals. As a result, student nutrition improved, health and nutrition education programs were established, and the income levels of local farmers increased. Most importantly, students learned to appreciate the ‘rich web of interdependence connecting them to farmers’ (Stone, 2009, p. 41).

In the spirit of, Washington, Peterson’s efforts proved to be of such indispensable value to the local community that the people in the community and the state where she resides now feel the presence of the local farmers. The farmers have added to the material, intellectual, and moral wellbeing of the community and are helping to usher in a local green economy. Former White House Council on Environmental Quality, Van Jones, in discussing the value of a ‘green-collar economy’ espoused principles similar to those of, Washington, when he spoke before a bi-partisan committee at the Clean Energy Summit in 2009:

This is the common ground agenda. It should be the common ground agenda. We should be able to come together as a country on this one—finally. If we have the opportunity to fight both poverty and pollution by putting people to work in these new industries, we would be wise as a country to do that. That is common ground. We’re asking questions that progressives like, but we’re giving answers that conservatives like. We’re not talking about expanding welfare. We’re talking about expanding work. We’re not talking about expanding entitlements. We’re talking about expanding enterprise and investments. We’re not talking about redistributing existing wealth. We’re talking about reinventing an existing sector, and creating new wealth by unleashing innovation and entrepreneurship. This should be common ground.3

This notion of common ground was, to, Washington, the main organizing principle of an education of the hands, the head, and the heart. ‘No man,’ he wrote, ‘who continues to add something to the material, intellectual, and moral well-being of the place in which he lives is long left without proper reward. This is a great human law which cannot be permanently nullified—Up from Slavery, p. 280’ (Washington, 1907a, p. 182).

**Washington on Character Development**

The development of a strong moral character was a central component of, Washington’s educational philosophy. In the book, *Character Building: Booker T. Washington*, Washington equated character with power. ‘Character,’ he wrote, ‘is a power’:

If you want to be powerful in, the world, if you want to be strong, influential and useful, you can be so, in no better way than by having strong character; but you cannot have a strong character if you yield to the temptations about which I have been speaking. (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 42)

In proportion as students learned this, Washington believed that they would be better off (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 14). Washington taught students to ‘refrain from staking their
earnings upon games of chance’ (p. 15). This was one of the temptations he warned students to avoid. ‘Teach those with whom you come in contact,’ he wrote, ‘that they cannot lead strong, moral lives unless they keep away from the gambling table. See to it that you regulate your life properly; that you regulate your hours of sleep’ (p. 16).

Washington told students, ‘You should remain in school until you get to the point where you feel that you do not know anything, where you feel that you are willing to learn from anyone who can teach you’ (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 31). Once they were able to reach that point, Washington believed that education would have achieved its purpose, which was to give students a sense of truth. ‘Whatever we get out of text books,’ he argued, ‘whatever we get out of industry, whatever we get here and there from any sources, if we do not get the idea of truth at the end, we do not get education. Unless you get the idea of truth so pure that you cannot be false in anything, your education is a failure’ (p. 51).

Washington, argued that education in its broadest and truest sense would make an individual seek to help all people, regardless of race, regardless of color, regardless of condition (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 51). ‘And,’ he added, ‘you will find that the person who is most truly educated is the one who is going to be kindest, and is going to act in the gentlest manner toward persons who are unfortunate, toward the race or the individual that is most despised’ (p. 51). In other words, the ‘highly educated person’ is the one who is most considerate to those individuals who are less fortunate:

I hope that when you go out from here, and meet persons who are afflicted by poverty, whether of mind or body, or persons who are unfortunate in any way, that you will show your education by being just as kind and just as considerate toward those persons as it is possible for you to be. That is the way to test a person with education. You may see ignorant persons, who, perhaps, think themselves educated, going about the street, who, when they meet an individual who is unfortunate—lame, or with a defect of body, mind or speech—are inclined to laugh at and make sport of that individual. But the highly educated person, the one who is really cultivated, is gentle and sympathetic to everyone. (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 51).

‘I don’t care how much arithmetic we have, or how many cities we can locate,’ said Washington, ‘it all is useless unless we have an education that makes us absolutely honest’ (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 51). It was not until one reached the point of happiness and ‘supreme satisfaction’ out of helping others that Washington saw one as being ‘truly educated’ (p. 51). There was almost a religious sense to this. For example, in his autobiography, Washington said that he had to live and eat with his neighbors at Tuskegee in order to understand the needs of the community. In other words, in order to ‘truly understand’ the people of the local community, Washington had to become them. He had to live their lives. He had to eat their food, sleep in their homes, and speak their language. There is a religious sense in that—in the sense of wanting to connect so deeply to others that one ceases to act like an individual. Perhaps that is why, in speaking to students about the value of Christianity, Washington said,

We want to have you learn to see and appreciate the practical value of the religion of Christ. We hope to help you to see that religion, that Christianity, is not
something that is far off, something in the air, that it is not something to be enjoyed only after the breath has left the body. We want to have you see that the religion of Christ is a real and helpful thing; that it is something which you can take with you into your class-rooms, into your shops, on to the farm, into your very sleeping rooms, and that you do not have to wait until to-morrow before you can find out about the power and helpfulness of Christ’s reli-
gion. (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 95)

One of the main purposes of sustainable development is to teach students the value of ecology through the development of a kind of subjectivity known as ecological subjectivity. Ecological subjectivity broadens the informational base of the self to include other selves. In an effort to foster a sense of care for self, self is theorized to encompass care for other selves; thus care for self can only be achieved when care for others is achieved. The develop-
ment of this kind of ‘Christ-like’ subjectivity was illustrated by Washington in his approach to local community members in Tuskegee. For Washington, religion was informed by his devotion to Christianity; however, ecological subjectivity is informed by a different context:

Although national citizenship and cultural heritage are important elements of our identity, there is a larger context—a more inclusive whole—that embraces all of humanity; writers in this literature sometimes refer to the ‘human family.’ This perspective challenges the limitations and prejudices of national-
ism, which, as we have seen in recent years, have spawned partisan violence in many parts of the world. (Miller, 2005, pp. 1–6)

This perspective of an inclusive whole aligns with many of, Washington’s religious state-
ments. ‘In, the sight of God there is no color line,’ he wrote, ‘and we want to cultivate a spirit that will make us forget that there is such a line anywhere. We want to be larger and broader than the people who would oppress us on account of our color’ (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 121). In this desire, Washington called attention to the fact that ‘one individual is dependent for success upon another, one family in a community upon other families for their mutual prosperity, one part of a State upon the other parts for the success-
ful government of the State’; and in doing so, he was making the following ecological point:

One thing cannot exist unless another exists; cannot succeed without the success of something else. The very forces of nature are dependent upon other forces for their existence. Without vegetable life we could not have animal life; without mineral life we could not have vegetable life. So, throughout all kinds of life, as throughout the life of nature, everything is dependent upon something else for its success. The same thing is true of this institution and of every institution. The success of the whole depends upon having every person connected with the institution do his or her whole duty. (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 90)

In expressing such sentiments, Washington was expressing an early version of what environmental philosopher, Arne Naess (1991), called ‘deep ecology.’ Naess came up with this term as a critique of what he called ‘shallow ecology.’ Naess first developed this distinction in a speech he delivered in Bucharest in 1972. According to Naess,
‘shallow ecology’ describes ecological phenomena in quantitative terms, much like the scientific study of economics, and involves only ‘measurements of population, sizes of plants and animals, birth and death rates, the supply and utilization of energy and nutrients in the environment’ (Owens, 1980, p. 2). ‘Deep ecology,’ in contrast, takes an inclusive approach and compliments the quantitative approaches of shallow ecology with qualitative approaches.

A ‘deep ecology’ approach is what enabled, Washington, to tell students, ‘I want you to find the persons who are most forlorn and most discouraged, and do something for them to make their hours happy. In doing that, you will do the most for yourselves’ (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 69). ‘We can fill your heads with knowledge,’ he argued, ‘and we can train your hands, to work with skill, but unless all this training of head and hand is based upon high, upright character, upon a true heart, it will amount to nothing. You will be no better off than the most ignorant’ (p. 94).

In addition to entrepreneurship, the development of a ‘high, upright character’ was at the core of Tuskegee’s curriculum and educational philosophy. The training of head, hands, and heart was essentially a process of refinement. It was designed to refine students’ character. Consequently, it was often a painful process because it required one to confront fear and difficulty. Washington, wanted students to learn that confronting difficulties would strengthen their character, refine their character, and ultimately, make them powerful. ‘This is the point I want to make with you,’ he wrote; ‘that one of the reasons you are here is that you may learn to overcome difficulties. I have named some that you may expect to meet, but I have not named them all. They will keep springing up all the time’ (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 14). In proportion as students learned to rise above difficulties, Washington believed that they would accomplish the ‘high purpose’ for which education existed.

**Washington on Aesthetics**

Washington, argued that education is meant to make us appreciate the things that are beautiful in nature. ‘A person is never educated,’ he wrote, ‘until he is able to go into the shrubs there, is able to see something beautiful in the grass and flowers that surround him, is, in short, able to see something beautiful, elevating and inspiring in everything that God has created’ (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 52). Beauty, he went on to say, should be at the forefront of education, not just for the sake of studying beauty, but for something else:

> Not only should education enable us to see the beauty in these objects which God has put about us, but it is meant to influence us to bring beautiful objects about us. I hope that each one of you, after you graduate, will surround himself at home with what is beautiful, inspiring and elevating. I do not believe that any person is educated so long as he lives in a dirty, miserable shanty. I do not believe that any person is educated until he has learned to want to live in a clean room made attractive with pictures and books, and with such surroundings as are elevating. (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 52)

It is hard to say what influenced Washington in the direction of beauty. Certainly slavery played a role, for he said so in a book called *The Negro in the South: His Economic Progress in Relation to His Moral and Religious Development:* ‘I have been a slave once in my life—a slave
in body, but I long since resolved that no inducement and no influence would ever make me a slave in soul, in my love for humanity, and in my search for truth’ (Washington, 1907b, p. 10). That book was published four years after another book, Character Building: Booker T. Washington, where it was recorded that during one of his lectures at Tuskegee, he told students,

Try to get into a frame of mind where you will be constantly seeing and calling attention to the strong and beautiful things which you observe in the life and work of your teachers. Grow into the habit of talking about the bright side of life. When you meet a fellow student, a teacher, or anybody, or when you write letters home, get into the habit of calling attention to the bright things of life that you have seen; the things that are beautiful, the things that are charming. Just in proportion as you do this, you will find that you will not only influence yourself in the right direction, but that you will also influence others that way. (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 7)

More important than what influenced, Washington, in the direction of beauty is how he defined beauty; for it is in his definition of beauty that one begins to see what he hoped to achieve in the future through industrial education; namely, what kind of world he wanted future generations to inhabit. He said what we need most is ‘such an education as will help us most effectually to conquer the forces of nature;—I mean in the general sense of supplying food, clothing homes, and a substantial provision for the future’ (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 53).

One of the major critiques that proponents of sustainable development make is that the ‘old economy,’ by which is meant the industrial economy of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries erred in its desire to, as Washington said, ‘conquer the forces of nature.’ However, what Washington meant by that phrase was quite different from what other industrialists meant. The major barons of Washington’s day practiced a form of industrialism that contemporary ecofriendly activists would argue served to deplete the earth of its natural resources and minerals. Washington, like proponents of sustainable development, seemed to want a world where the beauty of the earth would be left intact.

At first glance, it does not seem as though industrial education could be offered as a way to preserve the natural beauty of the earth considering that it was the industrial revolution that brought forth the industrial economy, which is the complete antithesis of the green (sustainable development) economy. On the one hand, one could certainly argue that, Washington, was not practicing sustainable development when he was burning clay to make bricks to build the buildings at Tuskegee Institute. On the other hand, one could also argue that sustainable development is a learning process, and that by using the clay of Tuskegee, Alabama, to make bricks locally, Washington, was indeed practicing a form of sustainable development. Choosing not to buy bricks from another state certainly cut down on the pollution that would have been caused by transporting bricks from one state to another, and by using local resources, Washington, was able to contribute to and support the local economy of Tuskegee, Alabama.

And by having students develop a thorough knowledge of theoretical and practical agriculture in connection with theological and academic training, Washington, was setting the
stage for many of today’s urban sustainable farmers whose devotion to the land is as much spiritual as it is practical. It is hard to believe that, Washington’s idea of beauty would not have been linked to some kind of practical devotion to self-reliance. It is difficult to imagine that, Washington, would have stayed in the realm of abstract thought when discussing beauty. That much is clear. What may be less clear, but what may certainly be offered as conjecture given, Washington’s statements about labor is that his notion of beauty was inextricably linked to nature:

When you speak to the average person about labor—industrial work, especially—he seems to get the idea at once that you are opposed to his head being educated—that you simply wish to put him to work. Anybody that knows anything about industrial education knows that it teaches a person just the opposite—how not to work. It teaches him to make water work for him, air, steam, and all the forces of nature. That is what is meant by industrial education. (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 54)

In teaching one to make all the forces of nature work for oneself, it seems hard to imagine that, Washington—the ‘deep ecologist’—could have meant anything less than a relationship based on sustainable development. How else can one make the forces of nature work for oneself? In an ecological sense, making the forces of nature work for one’s self means making them work for others. Washington wanted students to put their whole conscience into labor. Labor was not to be practiced or done outside of critical thought. It was to be practiced with the community in mind, the earth in mind, the future in mind, with beauty in mind. In describing the beauty of labor, he wrote,

When I say work, I mean study of books, work of the hand, effort of the body, willingness of the heart. No matter what the thing is, put your conscience into it; do your best. Let it be possible for you to say: ‘I have put my whole soul into my study, into my work, into whatever I have attempted. Whatever I have done I have honestly endeavored to do to the best of my ability.’ (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 71)

While it may have seemed to some of his critics that what he had been practicing at Tuskegee and saying about industrial education around the country might have overlooked the development of the Black race in terms of political integrity, one can imagine that in answering his critics, Washington’s response might have sounded something like this:

You might as well argue that because a tree is planted deep down in Mother Earth, because it comes in contact with clay, and rocks, and sand, and water that through its graceful branches, its beautiful leaves and its fragrant blossoms it teaches no lesson of truth, beauty and divinity. You cannot plant a tree in air, and have it live. Try it. No matter how much we may praise its proportions and enjoy its beauty, it dies unless its roots and fibers touch and have their foundation in Mother Earth. What is true of the tree is true of a race. (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 110)
General Discussion

One of the most valuable contributions that Washington makes to contemporary forms of sustainable development is the idea that ultimate happiness and wellbeing is inextricably linked to the happiness and wellbeing of those who are least fortunate. This is a topic that is often left out of sustainable development discourses. Sustainable development discourses are often limited to topics such as water conservation, energy efficiency, organic agriculture, and so on.

Even though recent documents such as the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) Report released in 2011 entitled *Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication*, and the World Bank report released in 2012 entitled *Inclusive Green Growth: The Pathway to Sustainable Development*, discuss the eradication of poverty as a major tenet of sustainable development, the affective, or what might be called ‘soft’ aspects of sustainable development that Washington discussed, such as kindness and beauty, are vastly under-theorized in both reports.

These ‘soft’ aspects of sustainable development, however, are in fact central to the development of a sustainable economy. This was shown by author, Van Jones, in his book, *The Green-collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems* (2008). In that book, Jones, argued that the aftermath of Katrina’s devastating rampage on the city of New Orleans demonstrated that issues of poverty, climate destabilization, petrochemical poisons, and the vulnerabilities of an oil-based economy were life and death issues that affect us all (Jones, 2008, p. 22). To Jones, Katrina and its aftermath illustrated two crises that we presently face in the United States: radical socioeconomic inequality and rampant environmental destruction (p. 24).

The importance of these ‘soft’ characteristics was also shown by, Dana Lanza, in an article entitled ‘Tapping the Well of Urban Youth Activism: Literacy for Environmental Justice’ (2005). In that article, Lanza, discusses her experience as a resident in low-income housing adjacent to the Bayview Hunters Point Shipyard, a federal Superfund site located in San Francisco, CA. As she says, ‘I was given no disclaimer and signed no waiver; there were no warning signs posted around the site’ (Lanza, 2005, p. 214). After talking to her neighbors, she found that they had a ‘hyperawareness’ of environmental concerns because they were forced to confront the consequences of poor environmental management on a daily basis. As she explained,

... Bayview Hunters Point is one of the Bay Area’s most polluted places, with heavy industry, 325 toxic sites, two Superfund sites, and two aging power plants. One of the city’s most diverse communities, it is also one of the poorest. Ninety percent of area residents are people of color. More than 50 percent of area households are considered low or very low-income. Many of the thirty thousand Bayview residents, a third of whom are children, suffer from high rates of cancer and asthma—a possible consequence of the noxious air. (Lanza, 2005, p. 216)

A systemic look at Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and Bayview Hunters Point reveals what, Lanza, described as the ‘clear interrelationship between health, environmental degradation, racism, and economics’ (Lanza, 2005, p. 217). Home to 5% of
San Francisco’s population, Bayview Hunters Point contains 30% of the city’s hazardous waste sites. ‘The juxtaposition of odious industry and the homes of people of color,’ according to Lanza, ‘was not the intention of a single polluting corporation, but required the combined participation of city planners, financiers, developers, and even the federal government through its public housing programs (p. 217). A strategy of sustainable development that has as its central tenets the kind of affective qualities described by, Washington—kindness and beauty—would not result in the kind of social reality, Jones, and, Lanza, reveal in their studies.

As, Lanza, learned more about environmental justice issues and became more sensitized to the concerns of Bayview Hunters Point residents, she began to see a ‘disconnect’ between mainstream environmentalism and the environmental justice movement. As she explained,

When I sought an environmental group to speak to neighborhood kids about the Superfund site, or the other 325 toxic sites in our district, I found no one. Environmental justice advocates were focused on policy change or resistance; the mainstream environmental groups were promoting planting trees and getting kids into contact with the natural world. No one was ready or willing to explain to ten-year olds the dangers on the other side of our fence. (Lanza, 2005, p. 215)

Studies that were conducted by Literacy for Environmental Justice (LEJ) Youth Envision Program, which was a program that was started by, Lanza, have documented that less than 5% of the products sold in the Bayview Hunters Point community are fresh produce or meat items. Twenty-six percent are alcohol and cigarette products. One LEJ student intern, Jasmine Marshall, explained the significance of these findings:

When you walk into one of the corner stores on Third Street, you’ll see plenty of tobacco and alcohol advertisements everywhere, in front of the door, inside the store, behind the counter, in your face, on back of some chips, you never know. There’s no produce, nothing healthy. A tear would drop from your eye if you’ve ever seen a real store in a nice community. But when they were thinking about stores in Bayview Hunters Point, I guess they just said, Give them all tobacco. That’s all they need. Some smokes and some drink… and some crackers and some chips, maybe. But we need healthy food. We need fruits and vegetables just like anybody else. (Lanza, 2005, pp. 224–225)

What, Marshall, was explaining, and what, Lanza, argues, is a point that was discussed by Professor Marc Lamont Hill, in a recent documentary entitled Soul Food Junkies. In Hill’s view, the problem of the twenty-first century is still the problem of the color line. But today, Hill points out that the problem of the color line includes the problem of who gets access to healthy food:

There is no better example of racism in the twenty-first century than the relationship of black people and access to healthy foods. You know, people think about racism as an individual act of prejudice or discrimination from one person to another. That’s not what it’s about. It’s about systems, it’s
about structures, it’s about institutions; and the fact that black people live in neighborhoods where they can’t get access to healthy food choices and white people can get healthy food choices—that is classic textbook racism. When you want to wipe out an entire generation of people, when you want to engage in the kind of twenty first century genocide, all you have to do is continue to do what we’re doing, which is deprive people of access to healthy food. (Hurt, 2012, p. 21)

In the spirit of, Booker T. Washington, many urban communities have begun to address some of the problems that, Hill, described. Today, there are many examples of local communities that are engaging in small acts of self-reliance. Urban gardens are becoming more and more popular, neighborhood farmers markets are popping up throughout the country, and there is even talk among some city governments to utilize sustainable development methods to revitalize urban economies in cities such as Detroit, Michigan and Gary, Indiana.

One woman, a 76 year old local resident of Bayview Hunters Point in San Francisco, CA, told, Lanza, ‘My dream is to see all the houses in Hunters Point remodeled to have a little steeple on the roof with a windmill inside it. That way we can have green energy in this community, close the awful power plant, and end the asthma problems’ (Lanza, 2005, p. 226). In my view, her vision is a modern day vision of what, Booker T. Washington, described when he spoke of one of his graduates who had produced 266 bushels of sweet potatoes from an acre of ground in a community where the average production had been much lower. According to, Washington, the student had been able to do this by reason of his knowledge of the chemistry of the soil and by his knowledge of improved methods of agriculture (Washington, 1901/2000, p. 133).

It is important to remember that to, Washington, the sign of whether one was educated hinged on the question of whether or not one could make one’s self of such indispensable value that the people in the towns and states where one resided would feel that his/her presence was necessary to the happiness and wellbeing of the community. In an ecological sense, there is no happiness and wellbeing unless both conditions are felt by all groups of people. In other words, there is no true happiness and wellbeing if one groups’ happiness and wellbeing materializes by diminishing another group’s. That is what contemporary discourses of sustainable development must not forget. As long as there are economies based on principles of instrumental rationalism as opposed to treating others as ends in and of themselves, there can be no sustainable development. In, Washington’s view, happiness and wellbeing could be achieved through education of the head, hands, and heart. It is most likely that a similar kind of education will foster a contemporary economy based on principles of sustainable development.

Concluding Remarks

Recently, I sat down with a colleague to discuss a business idea. The discussion quickly took a detour and we ended up talking about sustainable development. He told me that the reason sustainable development was not popular among members of the business community is because businesses are too busy focusing on meeting bottom lines and they do
not have the time or the money to implement the kinds of changes that are necessary to initiate sustainable pathways. I disagreed. I told him the reason why sustainable development is not popular is because the discourse is too focused on mundane aspects of sustainable development; i.e. water conservation, energy efficiency, transportation, and so forth, and not focused enough on what is inspiring about sustainable development—ushering in of a world of beauty.

All over the country, there are offices with some variation of the title—energy, technology, and sustainable development. Many of them are located on college campuses. Where is the office of beauty and sustainable development? One would be hard pressed to find such an office. Energy efficiency, while absolutely necessary to develop a sustainable economy, is not sufficient to inspire its development. Energy efficiency will not inspire people to live sustainably. Beauty might, but even beauty, alone, is not enough. From a policy standpoint, beauty must be operationalized and understood.

If beauty only addresses the cosmetic characteristics of a community, sustainable development cannot be achieved. Sustainable development has to address issues that lay beneath the surface, which means that beauty from the standpoint of sustainable development has to do the same. The complete answer does not lie with, Booker T. Washington, for the concept of sustainable development is too complex to be left up to one person. However, Washington’s contributions in terms of his educational philosophy are meaningful to contemporary practices of sustainable development.

In my opinion, the greatest contribution that, Washington, makes to contemporary practices of sustainable development is the focus that he placed on aesthetics. It was a notion of beauty that encompassed kindness, wellbeing, character development, and entrepreneurial creativity. Not only did he discuss beauty, but he sought to achieve an aesthetic sense of beauty through education that aimed to teach students the dignity of labor, the value of character development, and the value of being able to think, speak, and act for a self that was not opposed to ensuring that other selves experienced beauty as well. These are valuable contributions to contemporary practices of sustainable development; and quite frankly, they do not receive enough attention.

With the exception of entrepreneurial creativity, the development of ecological subjectivity and kindness are not traits that are discussed much in the context of sustainable development; nor for that matter are they discussed much in the context of education policy. Neither No Child Left Behind (NCLB) nor Race to the Top (RTTP) stipulate kindness as a measure of academic integrity, and nowhere is it written in either one of these documents that the notion of self should be interpreted to include other selves. That language would be too ‘soft’ for education policy and too threatening to the philosophical ideal of rugged individualism. Yet upon closer reflection, the adoption of such language by policy-makers would probably strengthen the practice of education as well as the philosophy of individualism.

With, Washington, kindness was central to education. That is why he told students, ‘You will find that the person who is most truly educated is the one who is going to be kindest … ’ (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 51). That is the same kind of language used by holistic educational theorists and education for sustainable development theorists today, both of whom talk about the significance of fostering an attitude of loving-kindness in students. David Orr, for example, who is a professor of environmental science at Oberlin
University, argues that our serious problems in education are first and foremost ones of heart and empathy, and only secondarily those of intellect. Mere smartness, he says, is much overrated and is not, as widely believed, entirely synonymous with intelligence; but ‘good—heartedness’ is a kind of long-term intelligence (Orr, 2008, p. 215).

One might ask, ‘What constitutes long-term intelligence?’ If I was to answer that question, I would defer to, Booker T. Washington, who said, ‘If there is one person more than another who is to be pitied, it is the individual who is all heart and no head’ (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 50). Washington did not wish to have students get the idea that he under-valued or overlooked the strengthening of the mind; for he said,

You will see numbers of persons going through the world whose hearts are full of good things—running over with the wish to do something to make somebody better, or the desire to make somebody happier—but they have made the sad mistake of being absolutely without development of mind to go with this willingness of heart. We want development of mind and we want strengthening of the mind. (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 50)

In other words, long-term intelligence, in, Washington’s view, constituted a balanced education mediated by the head, the hands, and the heart. Washington, did not want students to get the idea that an educated person was someone who looked down on another person simply because that other person may have been less educated. To, Washington, an educated person was a kind person who valued a sense of aesthetic beauty for self and for whomever else he or she encountered. An educated person to, Washington, was one who knew how to go into any community and make it thrive through entrepreneurial creativity, a strict sense of moral discipline, and an aesthetic sense of beauty. Most of all, he or she was a person who simply desired to ‘make somebody happier’ (Washington, 1903/2008, p. 50). If sustainable development practices aim to evolve us toward a fuller appreciation of life, theorists would be wise to consider statements by, Booker T. Washington, and others in regards to an education of the head, the hands, and the heart; for they are statements worthy of contemplation.

Notes

1. ‘Northfield Mount Hermon (NMH) school.’ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northfield_Mount_Heron_School
2. ‘About NMH.’ http://www.nmhschool.org/about-nmh
3. ‘Van Jones at the Clean Energy Summit at UNLV,’ 2009, https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=van+jones+clean+energy+summit+2009

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