

SEVEN

DEBORAH AND THE
VALUE OF JUSTICE

Deborah summoned Barak . . . and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel has commanded: Go march up Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men. . . . And I will draw Sisera, Jabin's army commander, with his chariots and his troops, toward you up to the Wadi Kishon, and I will deliver him into your hands." But Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go." "Very well, I will go with you," she answered. "However, there will be no glory for you in the course you are taking, for then the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman."

—Judges 4:6–9

I have been very fortunate in my life not to have someone close to me be victimized by crime. Except, of course, my close friend, Alex.

Alex and I met in 1987, shortly after Al Gore had announced he was running for President. It was the summer after my sophomore year in college, and I traveled to Washington to volunteer for the young Southern moderate who had inspired me with his creative and forward-looking approaches to issues such as arms control and science and technology development. Alex, a native of Gore's home state of Tennessee, had been working in his Senate office.

From the outside, it would have appeared that Alex and I were polar opposites. I was a brash, ambitious Harvard student; Alex was a country-boy graduate of the University of Tennessee, who prided himself on his rural roots and values. Yet with our mutual love of

American history, Kentucky basketball, and playing guitar, we became close friends. We loved to hang out at the Jefferson Memorial, the monument to our mutual political hero, particularly when the cherry trees were blossoming. We shared an apartment in Crystal City, Virginia, with several other Gore staffers, and we all became friends for a lifetime.

Throughout our 12-year friendship, I learned many valuable lessons from Alex. Alex was a fierce patriot—his signature line was, “You’re a great American”—and his love of country rubbed off on everyone around him. Alex especially loved the South, our home region, and our long talks gave me a greater appreciation of the culture and the people among whom I was reared. Alex also prized the nobility of public service—there was no one who advocated my entry into electoral politics more strongly.

Most importantly, Alex cherished justice. He became involved in politics to help America live up to its ideals, and to help redress the nation’s flaws, particularly in the areas of race and poverty. He had a strong and determined sense of what was right and what was wrong. He knew he was imperfect, and his choices were not always the right ones. But at his core, his strong heart continued to push him to better himself and to pursue justice for everyone, all great Americans.

In the middle of my first campaign for Treasurer, I was on the phone with Alex, who had been invaluable in helping me raise money among his contacts in Tennessee. A financial reporting deadline was approaching fast, and I was pushing Alex to collect his fundraising commitments. The last thing I told him—and I earned a hearty laugh from Alex—was that he was a great American.

A few hours later, sitting in his parked car on a busy street in Nashville, Alex was killed when an out-of-control speeding car hit his vehicle. The driver, who had been convicted previously more than 20 times for alcohol-related offenses, had a blood-alcohol level of more than two times the legal limit. Alex was 35.

It is difficult to describe the feeling of helplessness I felt. With my father’s death, I had months to prepare, months in which I was able to come to closure. With Alex, there was no explanation and no understanding.

The funeral was surreal. Alex was eulogized by some of Tennessee’s most powerful elected officials; including, of course, Vice President Gore, who interrupted a busy presidential campaign schedule to lend his comfort to us—something I will never forget. Alex’s favorite musician,

popular folk-country artist Steve Earle, performed a plaintive ballad. The highlight, however, was a speech by Alex's childhood friend, now a Nashville doctor, who reminded us of what we loved most about Alex—his imperfections, his crooked smile, and, most of all, his enormous heart.

A few months later, I returned to Nashville to attend the trial of the man who took Alex's life. I was there mostly to comfort Alex's mom, who I had come to love as family, and whose name, Joy, no longer seemed fitting. But I also wanted to get a look at the defendant. Emotionally, I was disappointed: the man I envisioned as a monster appeared small and broken. In his eyes, I saw nothing—no remorse, no anger.

In the end, we were pleased that he received the maximum sentence: twenty years in prison. Justice had been served. But we could not help but think of the injustice of the legal system that allowed this man back on the street, time and time again.

Six years later, we all gathered together back in Nashville for the wedding of one of our Crystal City crew, Amy Hayes. Another roommate, George Phillips, had the responsibility of lighting a candle for Alex, and he carried the candle with him—which he named Alex—to the dinner and reception. Alex's parents and I had the heartiest laugh when we saw George positioning the candle to make sure that "Alex" had a good view of the most attractive women on the dance floor.

In fact, Alex's light will never go out. In every campaign I run, Alex's wisdom is with me. Every time I hear a Johnny Cash song, I remember Alex's pride when the country legend had to borrow his guitar at a Gore campaign rally. But most of all, I will always continue to see that flame blazing within Alex; a light that stands for justice and hope, and a love for the country that provided those blessings.

DEBORAH: THE JUDGE AND THE WARRIOR

Justice also burned within the heart of one of the greatest heroines in the Hebrew Bible: Deborah, the prophetess, teacher, judge, and warrior, who can be found in Chapters 4 and 5 of the Book of Judges.

Several years after Joshua's death, the Israelites were conquered by King Jabin of Canaan, who "oppressed Israel ruthlessly for twenty years." The people of Israel were led by Deborah, who sat under a palm tree and dispensed justice. One of the most inspiring images in the Bible is of Deborah holding court outside, with Israelites coming from all over the land to seek her guidance, counsel, and wisdom.

However, with her sense of injustice about the oppressive treatment of her people reaching a boiling point, Deborah summoned her army commander Barak. She told Barak that God had commanded him to conquer Jabin's army, led by the general Sisera, and secure freedom for the Israelites. Barak demurred, telling Deborah, "If you will go with me, I will go; If not, I will not go." Deborah consented, and with a jab at the male chauvinism of the time (and perhaps eternally), she declared: "However, there will be no glory for you in the course you are taking, for then the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman."

After Sisera unleashed 900 chariots upon the Israelite army, Deborah ordered Barak to charge forward. With God's intervention, the Israelites killed all of the Canaanite troops, except for Sisera, who fled to safety. He was welcomed into a tent by Jael, the wife of a political ally. After Sisera fell asleep, Jael killed him with a pin and a mallet. Soon afterward, the Israelites destroyed the rest of King Jabin's army, and drove him from power. Because of the bravery of these two women, who took courageous actions to rid their people of injustice, the land was peaceful for forty years.

Fittingly, the Bible calls Deborah "*eshet Lapidot*." This has usually been translated as "the wife of Lapidot." However *lapidot* is also Hebrew for "torches," so "*eshet Lapidot*" could mean "a woman of torches." Like Alex, Deborah's torches could be said to have burned brightly for justice.

THE MORAL AMERICAN VALUE OF JUSTICE

I use the story of Deborah to illustrate an essential value of the compassionate community: justice.

There is perhaps no value that so permeates the teachings of the world's religions than that of justice. The pursuit of justice is a consistent theme throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Bible commands, "Justice, justice shall you pursue"; and the prophets urged us "to do justice, to love goodness and to walk modestly with your God," and instructed: "Let justice well up like water, righteousness like an un-failing stream." The Psalmists termed justice a "deliverance," rectifying the gross social inequities of the disadvantaged, and putting an end to the conditions that produce the injustice.

More specifically, the Jewish Rabbinic tradition declares that all Jews have an obligation to actively promote justice and a just legal sys-

tem. For Christians, the apostle Paul presented God's justice as a grace flowing into and through the believers to the needy. Paul wrote that the demand for justice is so central to Christianity, that other responses to God are empty or diminished if they exist without it.

The passion for justice runs through the other major world religions as well. For example, a central theme of the Koran involved Mohammed's challenging an unjust society; the Buddha made justice a sacred value and the removal of suffering a holy truth; and Hindu leaders such as Mahatma Ghandi pursued social justice for all Indians in order to honor the three basic Hindu concepts of *dharmā* (duty), the *karmayoga* (the discipline of action) and *moksha* (spiritual deliverance).¹

The value of justice has also been a subject of political debate since at least the time of the Greek philosophers. Plato argued that due to the "irrepressible appetites" of the public, wise leaders were needed to mete out justice, and distinguish among human wants and needs. Aristotle, by contrast, had a more optimistic view of human nature, and he argued that the state's "final cause" (or ultimate purpose) was to promote justice through the creation of fair and just laws, allowing individuals to pursue their own version of happiness through the exercise of reason.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, Jefferson brought the Aristotelian vision into drafting the Declaration of Independence. And most of the Declaration—which served both as a justification for revolution as well as a mission statement for the new democracy—calls for the redress of long list of abuses by an unjust king. A few years later, when the Founders drafted the first sentence of the Constitution's Preamble, they declared that to create a "more perfect union," the first step is to "establish justice."

But while the American judicial system has long been the envy of the world, there has been a huge black mark of injustice inherent in the American democracy. Even the slaveholder Jefferson understood that racial discrimination (slavery being its worst form) undermined the very core of the American promise of justice. In the words that appear above the memorial Alex and I would visit often, Jefferson's famous reflections about the institution of slavery remain: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever."

Four score and seven years after Jefferson's masterpiece, God's justice did indeed awaken from His slumber. Abraham Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address, revealed that Jefferson's ideal that "all men are created equal" had not yet been realized, and that the Civil War tested

whether the notion of justice for all was in fact viable. Only through an end to slavery could the United States consider itself a just nation.

And yet, even a century after emancipation, injustice still enveloped this country. It took America's third great messenger of justice (after Jefferson and Lincoln)—Martin Luther King, Jr.—to articulate why African-Americans could no longer wait for civil rights. In his remarkable "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," King explained that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." With a list of examples of injustice in the Jim Crow South—that was even more persuasive than the list of regal abuses enumerated by Jefferson in 1776—King explained that the fight for civil rights was a fight for the soul of our American democracy. Citing the justice missions of Jesus, the Hebrew prophet Amos, the apostle Paul, and Presidents Jefferson and Lincoln, King revealed that it was up to all good people to be "extremists for love"; that the fight for justice embodied the moral imperative to love your neighbor as yourself.

King's letter indeed was the culmination of his decade-long rhetorical mission to link the Civil Rights movement to the Judeo-Christian ethic. By marrying language from the Declaration of Independence with Biblical verse, King compellingly decreed that voting rights for all Americans was a manifestation of God's will to create all humans equal. As Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Taylor Branch notes, King's message was both revolutionary and a natural progression from America's last great messenger of justice, Abraham Lincoln: "It was strange or even blasphemous to put the humdrum workings of democracy on a par with a belief in God, but from the slave side of history, they were comparable wonders. In the Civil War, when both sides claimed divine blessing, Lincoln's distinctive purpose was to uphold the democratic intuition. From his cell, King did not hesitate to stress the political side of conviction to the Birmingham clergy, or to transcend race as a prophet of redemption to his own persecutors."² (Ironically, and amusingly from today's perspective, King's approach was met with strong criticism from the religious right: In 1965, Rev. Jerry Falwell complained: "Preachers are not called upon to be politicians, but to be soul winners.")³

Despite King's success in reshaping civil rights law, we still remain far removed from his dream of a colorblind society that he so eloquently described in 1963, as my father stood with tens of thousands of fellow civil rights marchers at the Mall in Washington. African Ameri-

cans, other minorities, and those living in poverty continue to face injustice, even where the laws are supposed to provide equal treatment.

The most significant and socially disruptive disparities can be seen in the area of public education. While “separate but unequal” public schools were outlawed by the Supreme Court more than 50 years ago, many schools remain segregated, and many would argue that a new struggle for justice has taken King’s place.

In his powerful book *Shame of the Nation*, former educator turned public-education activist Jonathan Kozol argues that the American public school system may be transforming itself into a kind of “educational apartheid.” Kozol demonstrates that many of the public schools that were deeply segregated in King’s time are no more integrated now. Further, he shows how many of the schools that were forcibly integrated during the 1970s have been rapidly re-segregating. Worst of all, many of the predominantly minority schools in the inner cities receive among the lowest per pupil funding in the country.⁴

Like many of the segregated institutions of the last century, these schools are both separate and *unequal*. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrate that African American and Latino students trail white students in most dimensions of schooling such as attendance, enrollment, completion of specific grades, and, most notably, test scores. In fact, minority students trail their white peers academically by four grade levels on average by the time they finish high school. Further, as the Urban Institute and the Harvard Civil Rights Project discovered, less than half of African American and Latino students graduate from high school nationwide. Study after study demonstrates how poverty and its manifestations, such as poor health and family disruption, directly and undeniably serve to broaden the opportunity gap between urban, minority schoolchildren and their suburban white middle-class peers.⁵ This opportunity gap creates serious injustice, and it is morally unacceptable.

The point may have come, such as with the injustice of Deborah’s time, where there is no other choice but to take immediate remedial action. Education efforts must target these desperately needy schools to guarantee a true equal treatment under the law. This is a moral imperative: the Biblical injunction “You shall not . . . place a stumbling block before the blind” has been applied frequently by religious scholars to the sin of keeping someone in ignorance from information that will protect them. Access to quality education must be equal, or many children will

always be more predisposed to failure.⁶ With no justice within our system of education, there will be no glory for any of us.

GUARANTEEING JUSTICE THROUGH QUALITY EDUCATION

One model for reform can be found in my home state. For decades, Kentucky ranked near the bottom of educational achievement in the country, and it was no coincidence that we ranked near the top of the charts in poverty, child malnutrition and poor health care. The state, however, took an historic step in the late 1980s and provided an example for the rest of the nation. Where the politicians had failed for so long, the judicial system—like Deborah under her palm tree—intervened. In 1989, adjudicating a lawsuit against the General Assembly brought by a group of low-income county school systems, the Kentucky Supreme Court ruled that the entire state public school system was unconstitutional. In *Rose v. Council for Better Education*, the Court ordered the legislature to provide adequate funding for every school, to provide everyone with an equal opportunity to a sound education: “Equality is the key word here . . . The children who live in poor districts and the children who live in rich districts must be given the same opportunity and access for an adequate education.” With very specific direction from the Court, and the guidance of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence—a non-profit, private group which even today is at the national vanguard of education reform—the General Assembly passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA).⁷

One significant objective of KERA was to mandate educational accountability through the establishment of quantifiable standards for achievement in subjects such as reading and math, the development of standardized tests to evaluate student performance, and the use of these test scores to measure educational progress and redress failure. Over the next decade, many other reform-minded states, such as then-Governor George Bush’s Texas, followed this path. Unfortunately, however, the notion of educational accountability, and the high-stakes tests which serve as the centerpiece of the strategy, began to swallow up all of the attention—and significantly, all of the funding—of the education reform movement on the state and national level. Other critical innovations of KERA—such as student creative writing and art portfolios, financial literacy training, and community service incentives—were marginalized or even completely abandoned by policymakers.⁸

Ultimately, President Bush brought the gospel of educational accountability to the federal level in 2001, in the guise of his No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB placed rigid mandates on every state to institute standardized testing, and to use these tests to measure pupil performance, with the goal that every American student would meet certain numerical targets, purporting to represent proficiency in reading and math by 2014.⁹

But instead of supplying a foundation for higher order learning, NCLB—and its obsession with numbers and scores—has created a ceiling, whereby the most that many students can hope for is a minimum basic education. With school systems “teaching to the test”—in other words, focused entirely on increasing standardized, multiple-choice test scores—studies show that student scores on other independent exams which measure broader knowledge (such as the SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement tests) may actually be *declining*. Other studies demonstrate that the relentless focus on high-stakes standardized tests has resulted in a significant decline in reading for pleasure, effectively taking the joy out of learning and teaching.¹⁰

This tunnel-vision focus, moreover, fails to teach our children about important life-skills, such as how to write creatively (or even coherently), to apply math and science to our high-tech, information-age economy, or to understand the importance of values such as civic involvement, enjoyment of the arts, financial independence, awareness of current events, or compassion toward others. As my friend Brent McKim, a Louisville teacher, argues eloquently, “much of what we value cannot easily be measured, and much of what we measure is of little value.”¹¹

Worst of all, the schools that may suffer the most are the very ones that NCLB purportedly was designed to help: the poorer-resourced, mostly segregated schools of the inner city and remote rural America. Many of the inflexible mandates placed on states by NCLB discourage and sometimes even prohibit creative solutions for addressing some of the most desperate needs of at-risk schools.

Further, the dramatic under-funding of the legislation by Congress forces school systems to use all of their limited resources on achieving the sometimes arbitrary mandates, leaving no room for innovation or advancement beyond the baselines. With all funding devoted to the minimum quantifiable baselines, any grander dreams for higher learning for many of these children are stunted. And if these baselines are not met—often because the teachers and school systems do not have the resources to meet them—the law levies financial sanctions on the “failing”

schools and societal scorn on students, who are deemed a “failing group of children.” This perpetuates the cycle of injustice that *Brown v. Board of Education* was intended to remedy: the Supreme Court’s ultimate justifications for integration were to eliminate the funding inequities and the pervasive sense of emotional inferiority experienced by African-American schoolchildren.¹² It is becoming more apparent that NCLB is leaving behind far more children than it is helping.

Accountability cannot be a one-way street. We need to be accountable *to* the students, educators, and schools, not simply exact accountability *from* them. Our public officials must provide adequate, equitable funding. And the public should hold its political leadership accountable for progress in the schools. As Deborah’s example shows us, true justice can sometimes only be achieved when the status quo of the existing regime is questioned and challenged.

Moreover, accountability should be a means to an end, not an end in itself. The ultimate goal of the compassionate community must be a *quality education* for all of our children. Instead of merely improving results on quantifiable standardized tests, we should be improving the quality of our schools. Instead of focusing merely on assessment and accountability, we should be promoting student learning, growth and development. Justice demands more than our children learning how to pass multiple-choice tests. Justice demands that we empower them with the skills they need for the high-tech jobs of the twenty-first century and with the well-rounded capability to become tomorrow’s civic leaders in the compassionate community.

If the United States is to compete in today’s world economy, quality education should become our new mantra. Moreover, the equal opportunity provided by quality education will enable us to seek justice for all of our children, regardless of income or background. And while the educational accountability movement dominates reform efforts across the country, there are still a few innovative quality education programs that our political leaders should examine.

One very worthy American initiative is the Coalition of Essential Schools’ Small Schools Project, a five-year program which seeks to enhance the quality, character and sustainability of small schools while spurring broader change in the public education system. The initiative is dedicated to supporting new and redesigned schools that are small, instructionally powerful, sustainable, and are guided by the following principles:

- Personalized instruction to address individual needs and interests;
- Small schools and classrooms, where teachers and student know each other well and work in an atmosphere of trust and high expectations;
- Multiple assessments based on the performance of authentic tasks;
- Democratic and equitable school policies and practice; and
- Close partnerships with the school's community.

Significantly, this project is committed to meeting the needs of young people and communities that have traditionally been educationally underserved; the majority of new schools in this initiative primarily serve minority students and students from low-income families.

Another exciting quality education effort can be found in Queensland, Australia. The "New Basics Project" is organized around four clusters of practices that are essential for success and survival in the today's rapidly changing society: (1) Life pathways and social futures: *Who am I and where am I going?*; (2) Communications media: *How do I make sense of and communicate with the world?*; (3) Active citizenship: *What are my rights and responsibilities in communities, cultures and economies?*; and (4) Environment and technology: *How do I describe, analyze, and shape the world around me?* The lessons are taught through well-defined classroom strategies that teachers use to focus instruction, enhance curriculum quality and improve student outcomes. And quality accountability is provided through assessable activities that are intellectually challenging and have real-world value, two characteristics which research identifies as necessary for improved student performance.

The charter school model should also be examined as a means to promote quality education. The most attractive feature of many of these programs is that they create a broad-based partnership that requires the involvement, ownership and accountability of teachers, administrators, students and parents. Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson has launched a bold model charter school initiative that involves some of the city's most prominent community organizations. Families are competing to sign their children up for the schools' admissions lotteries, and parents with kids enrolled have expressed a high level of satisfaction with the schools and their academic programs. Most significantly, students in these schools are making impressive progress in reading, math, and language. Unfortunately, in other areas of the country, charter schools face significant funding problems, and access

to them is often very difficult for those at-risk children whom the schools are designed to provide the greatest level of assistance.¹³ Charter schools should not be manipulated as a device to divert resources from the existing public school system; as with every other school system, they must be carefully monitored.

Corporate America must act as a partner in our efforts to provide quality education for all of our children. The business community knows best the workforce challenges posed by global competition and the retirement of the baby boom generation. Instead of outsourcing the new information-age jobs to India and China, our business leaders should help provide training for American children, particularly those in underserved areas, so that they can be prepared to serve in the twenty-first century workforce. In the past, poor infrastructure and remote geography have prevented many areas of my state and others like it from sharing in the country's economic growth opportunities. In today's world, with the Internet potentially connecting rural and inner-city youth to the modern job market, the only things standing in the way of progress are the barriers to quality education. Business leaders should invest in their future workforce by ensuring that every school is hooked up to the Internet, and that by third grade, every child is provided a laptop computer. Justice requires us to remove all stumbling blocks and enable the hills of Appalachia and the projects of Los Angeles to become the new breeding ground for tomorrow's leaders of the new economy.

A new quality education paradigm would also demand more years of affordable, mandatory education for all of our children. With our children competing for jobs not only with kids from neighboring states, but with their peers in growing economies such as India and China, the traditional K-12 model is as outdated as the software designed to run the mainframe computers of the 1970s. As discussed earlier in this book, every child needs the opportunity for higher education to have access to the high-paying jobs of the twenty-first century. At least two years of higher education—whether university, community college or technical education—must be available and affordable for every American child.

We also must look at our children's entry point into education. New research into brain development demonstrates that the first three years of a child's life are extremely critical for her emotional and intellectual growth. That's why we need to provide every American child with the opportunity to attend preschool and all-day kindergarten programs. As Delaware Senator Tom Carper argues, "children

who attend high-quality preschool programs that prepare them to read and build cognitive, verbal, and social skills go on to do measurably better in school and in life than kids who don't have that opportunity. They get better scores on academic achievement tests in school, they go on to get better jobs, and they are less likely to become dependent on welfare or to commit crimes." Indeed, studies of preschool programs in Michigan and North Carolina demonstrate that public investments in such programs could deliver a sevenfold return, in the form of increased productivity and decreased social spending. Further research demonstrates that all-day kindergarten programs advance academic achievement for most children, particularly those in at-risk communities.¹⁴

Providing quality education to all of our children also requires us to address those who are on the front line of public education: our teachers. This is also a Biblical imperative: the practice of tithing, common to many Jews and Christians, finds its origin in the mandate to financially support the Levite priests, who served as the communities' teachers and spiritual leaders.¹⁵ Teachers are our modern-day Levites, charged with nurturing our future leaders. We must demand quality and accountability, but we must also ensure that they are rewarded for their choice of profession and for their excellence when they nurture and train our children for the twenty-first-century workforce.

Rewarding them is not only the right thing to do for our teachers; it is the right thing to do for our students. According to a study by Education Trust, a good teacher impacts student achievement more than any other factor: socio-economic status, race or parent's education. Researcher William Sanders determined that three years of learning from good teachers can lift students' standardized test scores by 50 percentile points.¹⁶ Similarly, attentive and caring teachers can improve writing skills, inspire students to appreciate the arts, and encourage our children to understand the importance of being involved in civic and political life and their communities.

Decades ago, teaching was one of the few professions available for smart, young women. Today, with the broad gains that women have made in the workplace, the pool of college graduates entering the profession has shrunk dramatically. Further, both women *and* men are discouraged from the profession when teacher pay decreases proportionately with private sector jobs, and as stories circulate of increased violence and disruption in the classroom.

We need to develop new incentives to draw our skilled young people into teaching, and to promote teaching in troubled school systems. An obvious start is higher pay: teacher salaries should be increased up to 25 percent across the board in order to be competitive with equivalent professional jobs in the private sector. With funding crunches affecting every state government and school district, however, policymakers and local administrators need to develop other creative approaches.

Teachers not only need more professional pay; they need a professional say—more of a voice in the educational reform process. While physicians are regularly in the center of efforts to improve the quality of the nation's health care system, too often teachers are left out or offered only a token role in developing new educational policies. Too frequently, teachers are only part of the implementation of reforms, not the planning and development, despite the fact that they are the closest observers of our children and the curricula. Giving teachers a place at the table, an ownership stake in the reform process, will not only attract more to the profession, it will ultimately improve the quality of our children's education.

Further, we should provide incentives for high school graduates to consider teaching by offering college scholarships to those who pledge to fill a vital societal or economic need in the classroom. For example, the national academies of science, engineering and medicine have suggested that the federal government establish and fund four-year merit-based college scholarships for 10,000 high school graduates, to be "paid back" by at least five years of K–12 public school teaching in science or math, where the needs are great to prepare our future workforce for the twenty-first-century economy.¹⁷ Similarly, scholarships can be awarded to those bright young men and women who pledge to teach within an at-risk school district and help improve opportunity and achievement.

Moreover, school systems should move to provide free, quality child care for teachers with young children. Knowing that your child is down the hall in a safe environment might provide the extra assurance to draw a talented mom (or dad) away from a more lucrative, private sector occupation.

Finally, states and school districts must revisit and codify the informal compact made with all teachers upon entering the profession. In return for their hard, noble work at low pay, we are supposed to provide these modern-day Levites with good benefits: affordable health care for themselves and their own children and the promise of a safe and secure retirement.

Unfortunately, teachers are frequently being denied their end of the bargain: cuts to retirement benefits, particularly health care, are be-

coming more widespread across the country. This crisis has a familiar cause: dramatic increases in health care costs combined with an increasing number of baby-boom retirees makes it harder for states to financially support their teachers' pension funds.

One common method states have been utilizing to minimize their financial exposure to teachers' pension funds is moving from the traditional "defined benefit" model—in which teachers have guaranteed contractual pensions at retirement—to the new "defined contribution" model, where teachers invest their own money and the state provides a set contribution. With the latter, teachers have no guarantees—their retirement savings would depend on the success of their private earnings, and states are off the hook once the worker retires. In one promising recent development, West Virginia, which moved to a defined contribution model in 1991, voted in 2006 to return to a defined benefit approach. State policymakers responded to teachers who wanted and deserved long-term protection from economic uncertainty, and who did not want to have to deal with the vagaries of the stock market.¹⁸

Of course, every American has faced the squeeze of skyrocketing health insurance costs in recent years. But our retired educators deserve special consideration from lawmakers. Those of us with school-age children deeply understand the value of talented teachers who, day after day, put all of their energies into shaping young minds into powerful tools for progress. Teachers surely do not take on this incredible responsibility for the glory, and certainly not for the pay. They teach simply because they recognize that education is the building block of a progressive society and a successful economy.

There are millions of retired teachers across the country. All have contributed a portion of their salaries towards their retirement and health care benefits. All have gone into their classrooms every day, some accepting peanuts for paychecks, with the promise that future benefits would help redress many of their sacrifices. We owe it to them to uphold our side of the compact, to provide them with the secure and healthy retirement they deserve.

Every state must provide its teachers an inviolable contract. When they join the profession, teachers must have the assurance that whatever happens to the economy or to the state's finances, they must be guaranteed a secure retirement and full and affordable health care benefits. Anything less denies our moral obligation to the modern-day Levites on the front lines of our children's development. Anything less discourages tomorrow's bright young men and women from providing

these essential services to our children. Like Deborah's people, they deserve justice, too.

MESSENGERS OF JUSTICE

We cannot assume that the elimination of injustice will occur organically. As Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote so eloquently in his Birmingham letter, "Justice too long delayed *is* justice denied." It is incumbent on all members of the compassionate community to answer King's call to become "extremists for love" and take immediate steps to help eliminate the injustice inherent in our public education system.

The politics of self-interest are not viable in the context of education. Only by working together to improve the quality of our education system can we see the benefits in our children. Further, all of us would profit from a higher-educated workforce that can compete more effectively in the twenty-first century with emerging competition in Europe and Asia. We must come together, as did the ancient Israelites around Deborah's palm tree, to seek justice for all American children and their teachers in order to establish economic progress for the entire country.

In the compassionate community, we must remember that from Deborah's time to the present, our strongest systems of government have been those that treat their citizens—regardless of race or socioeconomic status—with the highest sense of justice. We must urge all of our political leaders to understand that until we create a greater sense of equality and opportunity in the classroom, we are not fulfilling our nation's promise, nor are achieving the grand dreams envisioned by our three great messengers of justice: Jefferson, Lincoln, and King.

Who will be the fourth great messenger of justice? Perhaps it will not be one person, but instead the compassionate community as a whole. It is up to every American to become messengers of justice and to remind our leaders and our neighbors that God created all of us equal. As King's contemporary, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, exclaimed, "Let there be a grain of prophet in every man."¹⁹

The flame of justice that burned from Deborah's torches and within my friend Alex still can illuminate our nation. We must not rest until we can see a flicker of hope within every young child, no matter their color, creed or circumstance. When we empower every child with the education and opportunity they need to become a great American, then we can proudly declare that our country does indeed provide justice for all.