Addicted to democracy: *South Park* and the salutary effects of agitation (reflections of a ranting and raving *South Park* junkie)

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> If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation are people who want crops without plowing the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. (Frederick Douglass)
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> The big questions in life are tough: Why are we here? Where are we from? Where are we going? But if people believe in (plural deleted expletive) like you, we're never going to find the real answers to those questions. You're not just lying; you're slowing down the progress of all mankind. (Stan, *South Park*)

Two things happened when I moved to Iowa: I started going to church and I started watching the cartoon *South Park*. It must be something about prairie living that started this quest for a clearer connection to the human condition. Every Sunday I wake up and get my children and myself ready for the 11:00 a.m. service. Every weeknight after the kids are asleep, I tune in to Comedy Central to watch this cartoon. In case there's any speculation that my watching *South Park* actually caused my need to go to church (if you've ever watched *South Park* I can understand this assumption), I'll make it clear: I started going to church first and began watching *South Park* a bit later. So you see, I think it's actually the other way around—I think going to church was the gateway into my *South Park* addiction. Let me explain.

Ranters and ravers

The church I go to is Unitarian Universalist (UU). UUism is the religion for people who don't believe in religion but somehow feel the need to regularly assemble in a religious tradition and affirm their nontraditional religiosity. From what I can tell, UUs are ranters and ravers. This is what I like about us. We rant and rave about everything from fundamentalist Christianity, to conspicuous consumption, to the computer age, to prairie erosion, to, well, just about anything. We do this because one of our UU principles is freedom of conscience—it's a natural extension of our religious tradition to rant and rave. This is what brings me to *South Park*.

For those of you who have never watched *South Park*, it's a television show all about ranting and raving (ranting and raving is hereafter defined as agitation for the purpose of social critique and transformation). The creators of the show use the context of the community of South Park to direct attention to the fundamental inconsistencies and hypocrisies of life in the United States. I never really noticed this about *South Park* the first few times I caught glimpses of it. Like many others, I reacted to the low-tech animation, the foul language, and (what I perceived to be) the general poor taste of the cartoon. But all that was before I became interested in ranting and raving at church. Now I think the show's the next best thing to God (whomever I perceive her to be) and the U.S. Constitution.

Developing a taste for the democratic drug: From Dewey to *South Park*

I teach a university course on multicultural education. (Now you're thinking I've been a ranter and raver all along.) In that course, I try to get my students to understand that they are part of history—to grasp in a visceral way that the world is like it is because of the cumulative results of collective human action and inaction. And just as I want them to see that a thing, particularly this thing we call educational inequity, is never "just the way it is," I also want them to realize that they are never "just who they are." Rather, as Dewey (1966) said, there is no such thing as a preexistent self. The self is "something in continuous formation through choice of action" (p. 351).

This concept is important in what I do because all of the students I teach are white, and the images they see of themselves in the media and in university courses (yes, like mine) are of white folks who identify with their white identity—either as flaming racists or as kind-hearted, color-blind liberals. My students don't see that the meaning of white identity is theirs to make both for themselves alone, now in this lifetime, and for others beyond into the future. They don't see the possibility of a positive, white antiracist identity, and they don't get the possibility that an identity is something we always yearn toward but never attain because we are constantly evolving. Our bodies and our minds are always changing. They're stuck, as Greene (2001) said, in the ordinary unseeing of every day, when instead I want them to "break through the 'cotton wool' of dailyness and passivity and boredom and come awake to the colored [I didn't intend this pun but it works for a multicultural educator] sounding, problematic world" (p. 7).

I'm not sure *South Park* is exactly what Dewey or Greene had in mind. But it can't be denied that the show, with all its irreverence and vulgarity (in fact *because* of its irreverence and vulgarity) causes one to think. The very premise of a community in which the children are always surprised and outraged by the ignorance of their parents is itself a commentary on how U.S. society socializes its members into "unseeing." Yes, the children swear a lot in South Park and that is unseemly, but what are they usually swearing about? Their (deleted expletive) parents! As a parent myself, I know there are times when, if my kids had been exposed to swearing (which I am proud to say they have not—OK, maybe just a little), they would, instead of whining "Maaahhhommmm," say "Mom, the (deleted expletive) reason that you just gave me for why I can't eat (deleted expletive) cereal with water doesn't make any (deleted expletive) sense." My kids continually have to put up with the ways in which my behavioral norms and fears constrain their world. And this is what the kids in South Park have to put up with too.

A critical literacy of community in episode 611

In an episode titled "Child Abduction Is Not Funny," South Park parents hear about a rash of child abductions on the news. Because the newscast says that most child abductions occur at the

hands of strangers, South Park parents decide to build a barrier between their community and the outside world. The only problem is they don't know how to build such a large wall, so they go to the one person in town whom they believe has the ability—the owner of the Chinese restaurant. The restaurateur is offended and angered at the suggestion that he knows how to build a wall around South Park, but he does it anyway under the constant attack of a band of Mongolians who arrive to invade the now nearly walled-off city. Meanwhile the children of South Park complain bitterly about having to play baseball by themselves because their parents walled off the rest of the world.

When South Park parents hear another newscast about child abductions explaining that instead of being taken by strangers, most children are taken by someone their family knows, they fit their children with unwieldy child abduction notification helmets.

Still another newscast informs the South Park parents that, instead of children being taken by strangers or by someone their family knows, most abductions occur at the hands of a family member. Throwing each other suspicious glances, for a short time South Park mothers and fathers refuse to leave their children's sides. They finally realize that their children will be in danger if they remain in their presence and would fare better alone out in the world. With a few belongings on their backs, the children are cast out of their homes.

When the children walk beyond the nearly completed wall around South Park, they encounter the band of invading Mongolians. The Mongolians take the children in, provide them with food and warmth, and see that they make it through the night. The following day the Mongolians succeed in blowing up the wall.

Upon hearing the noise of the explosion (which leaves the Chinese restaurateur muttering repeated deleted expletives in pidgin English), South Park parents come running and discover that the wall has been blown down and that, to their horror, their children have become Mongolians. The children explain that the Mongolians took them in when their parents cast them out, and this should make the Mongolians heroes. Hearing this, the parents experience an epiphany and realize that the true heroes are their children. It is their children, they realize, who make them see that you can't wall off the rest of the world. Walls only make things worse. Tearing them down brings people together.

Two themes of this episode strike me as particularly useful points of departure for developing awareness of the self and, moreover, the self in society that Dewey (1966) and Greene (2001) had in mind. Both themes have to do with critical, expanded understandings of literacy as a skill involving the deconstruction and reconstruction of social text. On the one hand, I see a theme related to a literacy of difference—to understanding the social construction of ideas of "sameness" and "otherness." The Chinese restaurant owner in this *South Park* episode is seen as different by the parents. They attribute to him an "authentic" knowledge of how to build walls, which symbolizes mainstream, static understandings of culture and identity.

The Mongolians take this symbolism even further and are a stand-in stereotype of the instant rejection and fear the dominant group feels toward those who are "other"—unless, of course, this otherness serves a social purpose (like providing interesting food or building a wall) or proves itself to be worthy by some other measure (like protecting children from harm). Then it is tolerated or even celebrated.

I also see a theme in this episode related to media literacy—to understanding the way that unquestioned reliance on the media shapes our subjectivity by providing easy "truths" and feeding on fear. When the South Park parents let the media interrupt their trusting relations with their neighbors, their spouses, and their children, they are letting the media disrupt the fabric of community—of many living as one. This is what the parents come to realize at the end of this episode.

The wall coming down symbolizes the rediscovery of this community and the reclaiming of truth. That's a pretty deep message for a "crude" cartoon—one that I would have missed if, due to my discomfort, I simply switched stations.

Turning them on so they'll tune in: Democracy, media literacy, and the act of teaching

When I joined my UU fellowship, the new-member welcome ceremony contained these words:

> We don't offer final and absolute truths or rigid dogma. Instead, we try to provide a stimulating and congenial atmosphere in which people may ask new questions, may seek answers, and be free to discover the best that is in each of them.

These words are meaningful, both in terms of religious and pedagogical responsibility. The best that is in each of us, in the view of famous UUer Ralph Waldo Emerson, is a radically imminent sense of the divine. "God" is not "out there," only to be encountered through some dog-eared book, but "in here"—all around us in nature and in our very selves, as we are part of nature. Simply by attending to ourselves as natural sources of the divine, we will find, said Emerson, spiritual meaning (Andrews, 2003).

So goes democracy. Democracy is not a concept to be marked off a syllabus as we teach it but one that exists to the extent that we believe and breathe it into being through our ideas and actions. Only by attending to ourselves as the sources of democracy will we find its political meaning. My point is that God and democracy are sustained through the meanings continually invested in them by people—people who may, in fact, disagree about those meanings. There is no such thing as a script when it comes to these ideas.

Except maybe when it comes to teaching. As Todd (2003) lamented, pedagogy is too often a sterile script—one that is missing two important and related elements: deep care for students and deep care for the search for meaning. Todd demanded that teachers think through our responsibility as something that allows students to "ask questions of their relationality and responsiveness" in such a way that we understand our responsibility "as something deeply connected to giving birth to signification" (p. 42). In my work with white teachers I try to attend to these words very closely and know that they mean it is my job (indeed my privilege) to assist students in understanding what their white identities mean to them. This doesn't mean that I don't talk about the relationship between whiteness and oppression, but what it does mean is that I give them a structure for thinking about themselves as part of this relationship; that is, I don't automatically place them as white people within the whiteness–oppression relationship but instead begin by having them position themselves on the outside looking in.

The structure I use is simple, and it is adapted from a feminist reading by Ferguson (1996) called, appropriately enough, "Can I Choose Who I Am? And How Would That Empower Me?" Ferguson distinguished between bodily identity (e.g., the physical conditions like skin color with which we are born and over which we have no control); social identity (e.g., the normative set of learned behaviors and beliefs associated with that bodily identity in our society; for white-skinned people this set of beliefs and behaviors has been shaped by a [conscious or not] investment in racism); and moral identity (e.g., the process of deciding and defining who we are through the actions we take in the world).

Given this structure, which is grounded in the critical literacy approach I take to my class, the students are able to observe their whiteness not as something absolutely indelible (yes, in one sense their skin color will always be white, and they will always recognize within themselves learned racist behaviors and beliefs) but as something that can with patience, effort, and love of self and others be transformed into something distinctly different—what I clumsily call "a

positive white antiracist identity." I don't expect that they avidly espouse this identity in my class; I simply present it as an option—one that is attractive enough to me that I have built a professional career around it.

I think this approach creates in my students a disposition to staying "tuned in" in my class for two reasons. The first is that they see that I respect each of them as individual human beings, thinking and acting in accordance with their own beliefs and convictions to which, of course, they are entitled in a democratic society. The second is that they see that I trust that each of them, when all is said and done, can and will use the structure I have given them in my class to produce some kind of positive change of some scale in themselves or in society. In effect, I think I place in them the same confidence that the *South Park* creators place in me. I believe my students will stop, wait, witness, and, when the "show" is over, form an opinion that is ultimately their own but will forever bear a trace of the growth that came through risking to see when discomfort might otherwise have had them turn away.

Pushing out on the prairie

When I became a parent, a wise friend once said to me that you have to think of yourself as an advocate for your child, because if you don't, why should anyone else? This is how I think of my work as a multicultural educator with white students. If I am not an advocate for a positive antiracist way of being white then no one else will be. Then what happens? Nothing—and that's the problem. This is my struggle—my form of agitation, and my way of making thunder and lightning. It is, in a nutshell, my commitment to the democratic process—to seeing things as if they could, in Greene's (2001) words, "be otherwise." Some of you may find it hard to imagine doing this work here on the prairie. Not me. If you were going to start a revolution based on white antiracism, what better place to do it than in Iowa?

As I watch the South Park families and their children struggle with a string of issues (some admittedly more inane than others) episode after episode, I am reminded that democracy is not a preachieved state but one that is only glimpsed through the ongoing exercise of its ideals. "You're all a bunch of freaks," says one character in episode 205 whose disability was turned into a week's worth of "awareness" activities by well-intentioned South Park parents. "Don't you realize that the last thing I ever wanted was to be singled out?... I just wanted to be ridiculed, shouted at, and made fun of like the rest of you do to each other!" Hearing this, the parents are offended by the ungrateful (deleted expletive). The South Park kids, though, think she's pretty (deleted expletive) cool.

Community, because of the tension between similarity and difference in any collective, is always fragile and partial. We are always going to be learning how to be the *unum*—the one of many. But vigorously exercising democratic ideals, even (especially) if doing so goes against public sentiment, is part of that learning. And it relies on the ranting and raving of the *South Park* creators, of me and my fellow Unitarian Universalists, of you and your communities, and of our students. When I teach about racial injustice in the United States, I don't want my students to be content with being cast into the role of oppressor. I want them to create new roles for themselves that challenge conventional meanings of whiteness and expand our thinking about what is possible in the world. I want them to be ranters and ravers—about this and everything else they learn in (deleted expletive) school, on (deleted expletive) television, and from their (deleted expletive) parents. When it comes to democracy, I'm proud to be a pusher.

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