

A New Mascot for a New Millenium

Last year I was on a plane to fly across the country. We waited at the gate a long time, when finally the pilot came over the intercom to announce that we were being delayed for a minor repair. When you're on a plane, nothing seems minor—but presently two mechanics passed my seat heading to the back of the plane. I turned to watch as they tried to repair a door on an overhead compartment that wouldn't close. Of course, you know all the overhead compartments *have* to be closed before take-off. Well, this truly was a minor problem, but it had to be fixed nevertheless. We sat for several minutes as they fiddled with the mechanism. Finally they left the job unfinished and returned a quarter-hour later, now with toolboxes in hand. Again they fiddled for several more minutes, apparently without success. I slumped down in my seat and tried to sleep while this continued.... Finally I was roused from my boredom as the repairmen left and the door at the gate was closed. The pilot announced we were ready to go, and I looked back to see that the overhead compartment door had indeed been closed—It had been secured shut, with...duct tape! ...The problem really hadn't been fixed, but at least we were able to get on with the flight. Presumably they fixed it later.

The story reminds me how resourceful we can be when we don't have the time or the energy to fix a problem. But I think we need to take the time and energy to fix *our* problem—the problem of the Indian mascot at BHS. It's not a problem that is going to go away: We can try to fix it with duct tape—but really we need to move to a solution. I think it is time for *a new mascot for the new millenium*. The Indian has done yeoman's service at BHS for 70-some years. I know all of you hope to retire by the time you are 70! It's time to retire the Indian and move on. This doesn't have to be a defeat, or a victory, for anyone. It can simply be an acknowledgement that times change—and what better time than now to acknowledge that?

I am most definitely not here to lecture you about being racist or disrespectful. God knows, I've been lectured about that for nearly a year at school board meetings, and it is hard to take. I know that, and I know you feel the same way. But we can't let that harden us to issues that in other contexts we would respond to readily and compassionately.

When this issue first came before the board, about a year ago, I said that I thought it was most appropriately handled through the Diversity Forum and at the school level. The school board has continued to back me on that choice, and we have resisted fixing this problem at the school board level—for two reasons:

First, I feared the political divisiveness it could produce if this became a public debate where each side tried to line up the most supporters. That route could only create anger and resentment. One side might win, but in a deeper sense both sides would lose. And I think that support for public education in Montgomery County would be eroded...possibly even financially eroded.

Second, the issue seemed to most concern the students and staff of this school, and so I didn't want to take it out of your hands, as though you were not able to work through this issue for yourselves. This route would be most likely to produce genuine dialogue and a resolution that would stick. As far as possible, I am against imposing solutions on people. The real blessing of the Diversity Forum in this county has been that

it has helped to create dialogue on difficult issues that engaged those most concerned in working together to find solutions. That is real education in action, in my view.

Perhaps that sounds like ‘passing the buck’ to some of you. But I think it is more a matter of empowering those who are most involved with the problem. The school board has not shied away from making difficult decisions when it was necessary.

I want to begin by talking about what I see as some of the problems with the Indian mascot. A lot of attention has focussed on abuses of the mascot—stereotyped cheers and gestures, caricatured faces, and disrespectful terminology. To the great credit of BHS, these have either never been a part of our use of the Indian mascot, or have been eliminated over the last year. Although the Indian Coalition has been slow or unwilling to acknowledge this, I want to be sure that it is recognized and credited.

Many people have felt that this should be the basis for a compromise position—the Indian mascot would be retained, but the abuses would be avoided. At first I thought that might be a possible compromise, too—but the Indian Coalition has refused that compromise, and as I think more about this issue, I don’t think it is appropriate either. Let me talk about why.

There are two kinds of reasons, one reflective, the other practical:

Suppose we narrowed down use of the mascot to just the name—“Indians”—and got rid of all the other manifestations. Can there really still be a problem with that? I think the answer is—yes. It takes some imaginative thinking—to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes—to appreciate this. But that’s a skill we try to teach our students anyway, in studying literature and history. Well, what could be the problem with the mere use of the name? Here’s what I come up with:

“There was once a certain man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when robbers attacked him, stripped him, and beat him up, leaving him half dead.” You probably recognize that as the setting for the story of the Good Samaritan, in the Gospel of Luke. But I want to depart from the biblical story at this point, and follow the robbers. For, in fact, having stripped the man, who happened to be a fireman, they took his uniform and went on to a party in Jerusalem. As it was a costume party, one of the robbers decided to dress up in the fireman’s uniform and pretend to *be* a fireman. The others liked this idea, and year after year one of the robbers, and eventually their descendants, to whom they bequeathed the uniform, would dress up in this stolen uniform and pretend to be a fireman. Some of the party-goers thought this was great fun. Eventually some of the descendants, who felt guilty about the robbery, started to wear the uniform as a way to honor the poor man who was robbed. The costume got passed around, and sold to other party-goers, but, year after year, for one reason or another, the fireman’s costume kept being worn to the party. Once, after many years, some descendants of the firemen happened to show up at the party and recognized the uniform of the fireman—and they asked that it stop being worn. They really weren’t interested in *why* it was being worn, they simply wanted it to stop.

And I think they were justified in asking this....Folks, that’s where we find ourselves today.

Perhaps it wrecks a story to spell out its meaning. Jesus usually left it by saying, “Anyone who has ears for listening should listen.” But here’s what it means to me. The story is told from the perspective of the Indians—for they were attacked, beaten up, and left half dead, for centuries. Not by us, but by people whom many of us are descended

from or have, in one way or another, benefited from. The Indians feel that most everything was taken from them—except their proud identity. The fireman’s costume represents the Indians’ identity. And now they find that someone else is even trying to assume that identity. It doesn’t really matter why we are trying to assume the identity—for honor or for fun. It is, in a sense, the only real part of their original inheritance that they still own—and they feel that even that is being appropriated. I think we need to stop wearing the fireman’s uniform to a costume party, and we need to stop pretending to be Indians. Whether it be for fun or out of respect, it’s just not appropriate.

Now, I know that these points have been made on other occasions with a lot of judgemental moralizing. But I don’t think that’s necessary for us to see the point. In fact, maybe that has sometimes prevented us from seeing the point, because we were too busy defending ourselves. Although the Indian Coalition has not been willing to compromise on the basic issue of whether the mascot stays, they have been willing to compromise in another way, that I appreciate. They are talking about backing off the moralistic rhetoric for the time being. And you probably know that at the request of a BHS parent they agreed not to use a parade permit they had secured from the town to follow the BHS Homecoming Parade. I think *that* compromise is just what we need at this point to be able to move forward. People can stop defending themselves and start looking for ways to unify behind a new image.

That was my reflective reason why we need a new mascot. I hope it sufficed to convince you. But I also promised a practical reason:

If we try to strip away all the potential abuses of the Indian mascot, we are likely to be left with nothing but the name—and what fun is that? Mascots *should* be fun! They should be able to clown around, we should be able to have banners and cheers. Why forego all of that, just to retain the idea of being Indians? And I’m afraid you *will* have to forego all of that. Because dealing with Indian imagery is like playing with fire, frankly. Warpaint, feathers, drums, chiefs...all of these things are part of various Indian religious rituals. Their use in public schools is a potential violation of the separation of church and state, and their appropriation by outsiders is as problematic as non-Christians using the image of the cross, or holy water for their own purposes.

Trying to maintain the Indian mascot and stripping it of all its other manifestations is like fixing the overhead compartment door with duct tape. It may work for a while, but it’s not a solution any of us are going to be happy about, nor will it last.

I’m here talking to you this afternoon—the faculty of BHS—because I know you will have a large influence on how this issue is handled by the students. Most all of what goes on in schools happens behind closed doors, between teacher and students. You will set a tone, and I care about what that tone is. That’s why I wanted to do what I could to present this issue in a way that does not attack anyone, in the hopes that we can begin to come to grips with the issue, and not the attacks. As I was reading through Meagan and Nick’s yearbooks last year, I noticed a lot of quotations from students to the effect of: “I don’t see why we should have to change our mascot.” There are two parts of that that concerned me. The “I don’t see why...” means they haven’t really been exposed to the issue in a way that they could hear. I don’t know that all of them would be persuaded even if they did hear, but I know that many of them would. And I hope that that is one of the effects of the task force’s efforts this year. But the other part “...why we should have to change our mascots” also concerned me because a transition can only work well if the

people involved can take ownership in the process. That is where I think all of you come in, because the students will take a cue from you. If you take a resentful attitude toward the discussion of this issue, so will they. But if you are able to convey an open and positive attitude about the issue, and even, I hope, a willingness to see change here as a good thing, then they will too. Not all of them...but enough of them. BHS is as successful as it is because it is a community of good teachers and good students who trust one another. You know that that is a sacred trust, and I'm asking you today to use it for good here.

Although I've focused on your influence with students, much the same can be said for your influence with the community as well—alumni, PTSA, and Booster Clubs. In all these cases, you will play a pivotal role in how this issue is regarded and processed.

I think it is time to retire the Indian mascot, and begin looking for *a new mascot for a new millenium*. And if we can handle this right, the community and future generations will thank you for that. And so will I.

Thank you for listening to me and helping me struggle through this difficult issue.

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Blacksburg High School Faculty Meeting
October 23, 2000.

Edited version published in: *Virginia Tech Conductor*,
insert in *Virginia Tech Spectrum*, December 1, 2000 issue.